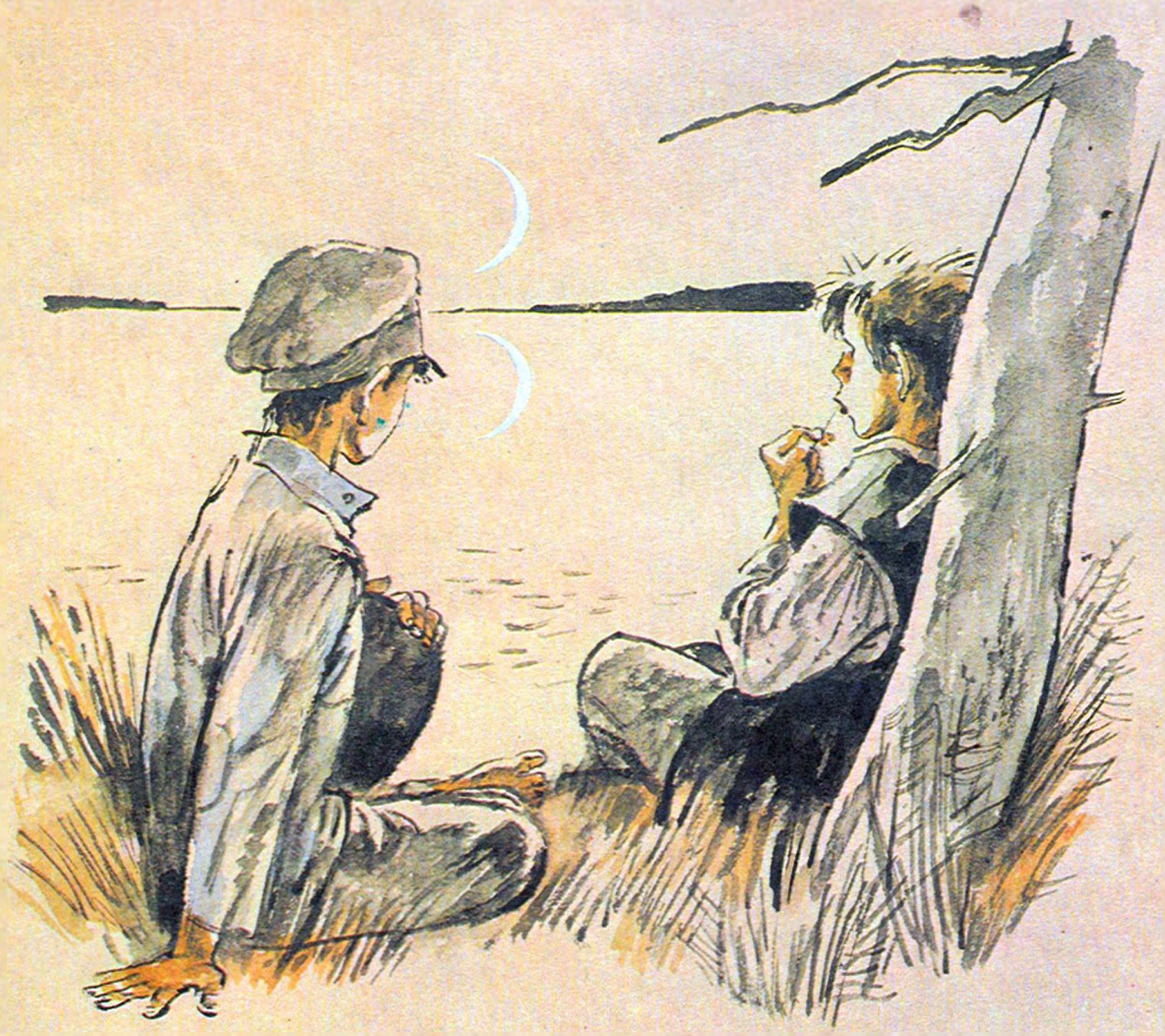
Arkady Gaidar



SELECTED STORIES

RADUGA PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

Arkady Gaidar

SELECTED STORIES

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Illustrated by *Vladimir Galdyayev*

А. Гайдар

ИЗБРАННОЕ

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

In August 1914, when I was ten years old, my father was called up into the army and sent to the German front. He ran home from the barracks to say goodbye. Head shaven, tall grey fur hat, iron-shod boots.

Our little red puppy, Kashtanka, didn't recognise him and started growling and barking. My youngest sister, Katyusha, simply couldn't understand what it was all about. Her eyes goggling, she kept touching the greatcoat, reached for the shoulder-tabs and laughed, "Soldier Daddy! Daddy's a soldier!"

When it was time to say goodbye, we all wept. Katyusha grasped that this was no laughing matter and began howling as if scalded by boiling water. I held myself in check.

Outside, to the rattle of drums and the thunder of martial music, my father left for the railway station with the company bound for the front.

It was towards evening, I remember. The station smelt strongly of oil, carbolic acid and Antonovka apples, of which there had been a most abundant harvest that year. And I distinctly remember that after the train had pulled out, I stopped on the bridge over the gully.

The sky was ablaze with fantastic colour that evening.

In the midst of the fast-flying but heavily sombre clouds, magnificent purple lights were glowing above the horizon. It was as if another life had been kindled somewhere over there, beyond the village of Morozovka, where the train had disappeared from view.

They had already embraced, wept, clattered, boomed, moved off and departed. "Goodbye, soldiers, goodbye!" They were going away to the sound of weeping, rumbling, whistling and songs. What would they bring back with them?

And they returned four years later.

Those who had not been crippled, gassed, buried in the ground or killed on the fields of Galicia, in the Carpathians, near Trebizond and Riga, came back to help the workers of Moscow and Petrograd already fighting on the barricades for a better life, for happiness, for the brotherhood of nations, for Soviet power.

I was only fourteen when I left to join the Red Army. But I was tall, broad-shouldered and, of course, I lied that I was already sixteen.

I served on various fronts. It would take me a long time to tell what I saw, where we advanced and where we retreated. But the main thing I've remembered is the furious determination, the infinite and unbounded hatred for the enemy with which the Red Army fought alone against the whole White Guard world.

Near Boyarka outside Kiev, my friend Yasha Oksyuz, the officer cadet, was dying in delirium. A pink foam was already bubbling on his caked lips and he was saying something not altogether coherent and incomprehensible, that the others couldn't understand either. "If," he muttered, "we changed position at dawn, and cut along the Dnieper, and straight across the Volga. And throw the letter there. Drop your

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grenades more carefully! And never, never... That's all! No... not all. No, that's all, comrades!" And whatever he muttered there, lying between the trampled rows of cucumbers and onions, shaking his head, whispering, knitting his brows, I knew and understood: he was anxious to say that we should beat the Whites today, and tomorrow, and to the death, that we should check the field sentries at dawn, that Petlyura would flee from the Dnieper, that Kolchak had already been driven beyond the Volga, that our sentry had thrown a bomb at the wrong time, and that because of this it had worked out so badly today that he still had a letter to his girl wife on him, and I myself could see it sticking out of the pocket of his worn green trench-coat. And in that letter, of course, were the same words to her. "Goodbye, remember me! But there is no force that can break Soviet power today or tomorrow. And that is all."

Who knows the little village of Kozhukhovka outside Kiev, somewhere near Boyarka? What are the kolkhozes like there, and what are their names? Dawn of the Revolution, October, Flame, Forward, Victory, or simply the quiet and modest Dawn? Anyway, that's where we buried Yasha. And then we buried another ten, and twenty, and a hundred, and a thousand. But Soviet power still lives, and no one, comrades, will ever be able to do it any harm.

I spent six years in the Red Army. At fifteen, I graduated from the Kiev Commanders Course and immediately afterwards, in August 1919, I was appointed commander of No. 6 Company of the Second Regiment of the Officer Cadets' Brigade.

Then I became battalion commander, commander of a mixed detachment, commander of Regiment No. 23 in Voronezh and, finally, commander of Independent Regiment No. 58 in the battle with lawlessness.

I was very young then, and, of course, did not command like Chapayev. I made the occasional mistake. Sometimes, I would lose my bearings, look out of the window and think, "It would be nice if I could unbuckle my sabre, hand in my Mauser and go and play baseball with the lads!"

Quite often I blundered, suffered a failure and even went my own way, and my comrades told me off and ridiculed me cruelly for this, but it was only to my advantage.

I loved the Red Army and thought of staying in it for the rest of my life. But in my twenty-third year, as a result of an old contusion on the right side of my head, I suddenly fell seriously ill. My temples buzzed and droned all the time and my lips trembled unpleasantly. I was under treatment for a long time, and finally, in April 1924, when I just turned twenty, I was entered on the rolls as regimental commander, but in the reserve.

That was when I took up writing. Probably because I had still been a boy in the army, I wanted to tell the new boys and girls what the life had been like, how it had all begun and how it had continued, because I had been able to see so much.

You know what kind of books I was writing. If we discount the first very feeble ones, then we are left with "Revolutionary Military Council", *School*, "Far-Away Countries", "The Fourth Dugout", *Military Secret* and "The Blue Cup."

I am now finishing a story, *The Fate of a Drummer*. This book is not about war, but about things no less grim and dangerous than war itself.

1937 *Ark. Gaidar*

SCHOOL

I. The School

CHAPTER ONE

Our town of Arzamas was a quiet little place, all buried in gardens and orchards behind rickety fences. "Parent cherries", early-ripening apples, blackthorn and red peonies galore grew in those gardens.

Placid scummy ponds ran through the town past the gardens. All the good fishes had died out in them long ago, and only slippery tadpoles and slimy frogs were to be found there. Under the hillside flowed the Tesha, a small river.

The town resembled a monastery. It had some thirty churches in it and four cloisters. There were lots of miracle-working icons in our town, but for some reason very few miracles happened in Arzamas itself. That was probably because the famous Sarovo Hermitage with its holy men was situated within sixty kilometres of our town and those holy men drew all the miracles to their place.

One was always hearing of things happening at Sarovo — now of a blind man recovering his sight, now of a cripple starting to walk, now of a hunchback becoming straightbacked, but nothing like this ever happened around our icons.

Once a rumour got around that Mitka the Gypsy, a tramp and well-known drunkard, who every year at Twelfthtide bathed in the river through an ice-hole for a bottle of vodka, had had a vision and given up drinking. He had turned over a new leaf and was taking a monastic vow at the Monastery of Our Saviour.

Crowds flocked to the monastery. And sure enough, there was Mitka next to the choir, bowing away and publicly repenting his sins, even confessing to having stolen a nanny-goat from the merchant Bebeshin the year before and spent the money on drink. The merchant Bebeshin was moved almost to tears and gave Mitka a ruble to buy and light a candle for his soul's salvation. Many people had shed a tear at the spectacle of that sinful man mending his ways and returning to the fold.

This went on for a whole week, and just when Mitka was due to take his monastic vow, he failed to turn up at the church — whether because he had had another vision of an opposite nature or for some other reason, no one could tell. A rumour spread among the parishioners that Mitka was lying in a ditch in Novoplotinnaya Street with an empty vodka bottle lying next to him.

Deacon Pafnuti and church warden Sinyugin, the tradesman, were dispatched to the scene for the purpose of exhortation. These two gentlemen soon returned and announced with indignation that Mitka was indeed in a state of insensibility, like a stuck pig, that a second bottle lay at his side, and that when they did succeed in shaking him awake, he had started swearing, saying that he had changed his mind about becoming a monk as he was too sinful and unworthy of it.

Ours was a quiet patriarchal town. On the eve of holidays, especially at Easter, when the bells of all the thirty churches rang out, a din stood over the town which could be heard in the villages for twenty kilometres around.

The Annunciation Church bell drowned out all the rest. The bell of the Monastery of Our Saviour was cracked, and it made harsh jerky noises in a grating bass. The smaller bells of the St. Nicholas Monastery tinkled out their shrill song. These three leading songsters were supported by other belfries, and even the homely church of the little prison perched on the edge of the town joined the general discordant chorus.

I loved to climb up into the bell towers. The boys were allowed to do this only at Easter. It was a long way up the dark twisting staircase. Pigeons cooed softly in the stone niches. The countless turnings made you feel dizzy. From up there you could see the whole town: under the hillside the Tesha, the old mill, Goat's Island, the copse, and farther out the ravines and the blue hemline of the town's forest.

My father was a soldier in the 12th Siberian Rifle Regiment. The regi-

ment was at the Riga section of the German front.

I was studying in the second form of the Technical High School. My mother, a doctor's assistant, was always busy, and I grew up on my own. Every week I took my report card to my mother to be signed. She would run a cursory eye over the marks, and seeing poor ones for drawing or handwriting, would shake her head and say, "What's this?"

"It's not my fault, Ma. What can I do if I have no gift for drawing? I drew him a horse, Ma, but he says, this isn't a horse, it's a pig. So the next time I hand him my drawing and say, this is a pig, but he got angry and says, it isn't a pig and it isn't a horse, the devil only knows what it is. I'm not training to be an artist, Ma."

"All right, then what about the handwriting? Show me your exercise-book. Goodness me, what a mess! An ink blot on every line, and here between the pages a squashed beetle? Ugh, how disgusting!"

"The blots are an accident, Ma, but the beetle isn't my fault at all. You're always picking on me! It isn't as if I put that beetle there on purpose! The fool crawled in and got himself squashed, and I'm to blame for it! I should worry about handwriting — call that a science! I don't intend to become a writer at all."

"What do you intend to be?" Mother said sternly, signing the report card. "A lazybones? The Inspector here writes again that you climbed to the school roof up the fire-escape. What's the idea? Are you training to become a chimney-sweep?"

"No. Neither an artist, nor a writer, nor a chimney-sweep. I'm going to be a sailor."

"Why a sailor?" Mother queried in a puzzled tone.

"Nothing but! That's definite. Don't you see how interesting it is?"

Mother shook her head.

"Of all the crazy ideas! Don't you bring any bad marks home again or I'll give you a good spanking, sailor or no sailor."

Tell me another one! I can see her giving me a spanking. Why, she never touched me with a finger. Once she locked me up in the lumber-room and all next day fed me with pies and gave me twenty kopeks to go to the cinema. I wish she'd do that more often!

CHAPTER TWO

One day, after gulping down my tea and hastily collecting my books, I ran off to school. On the way I met Timka Shtukin, my classmate, a fidgety little fellow.

Timka Shtukin was a meek, harmless kid. You could give him one on the nob without running the risk of retaliation. He willingly ate up his chums' unfinished sandwiches for them, ran to the grocer's next door to buy rolls for school lunch, and lapsed into a frightened silence at the approach of the form master, although he had no reason whatever to feel guilty.

Timka had one ruling passion — he loved birds. His father's cubbyhole at the graveyard church, of which he was the caretaker, was full of cages with all kinds of birds in them. He bought birds, sold them, swapped them, and caught them himself with a snare or trap in the cemetery.

He got it hot from his father one day when the merchant Sinyugin, paying a flying visit to his grandmother's grave, saw on the gravestone bait in the shape of scattered hempseed and a net with a string attached to it. Acting on Sinyugin's complaint, the caretaker boxed the boy's ears for him, and our teacher of religion, Father Gennady, said disapprovingly at Scripture:

"Gravestones are put up in remembrance of the dead, and not for any other purpose. To place traps upon them, or any other contrivances is sinful and blasphemous."

He went on to cite several instances from the history of mankind when such blasphemy drew down upon the head of the culprit the dire punishment of the heavenly powers.

It should be said that Father Gennady was a masterhand at citing examples. I believe that if he found out, for instance, that I had been to the cinema the week before without leave, he would dredge up from his memories some historical precedent of the Lord's wrath descending upon the guilty criminal during his earthly existence.

Timka was walking along whistling like a thrush. Spotting me, he blinked in a friendly way while at the same time glancing suspiciously in my direction as if trying to guess whether this person was approaching him simply or intended to play some dirty trick on him.

"Timka! We'll be late for school," I said. "We may be in time for the

lesson, but we'll miss prayers, sure as eggs is eggs."

"They won't notice anything?!" he said in a voice that sounded at once scared and interrogative.

"You bet they will. Ah, well, they'll leave us without lunch, that's all," I said calmly and teasingly, knowing how afraid Timka was of getting reprimands and being told off.

Timka shrank and quickened his pace, saying anxiously:

"It's not my fault! Father went to open the church. Left me in the house for a minute and was gone for ever so long. Sat all through the service. Valka Spagin's mother came to have prayers read for him."

"What, for Valka Spagin?" I said open-mouthed. "Is he dead?"

"It wasn't a service for the dead, it was for tracking him down."

"Tracking him down? What'yer talking about?" I said, a tremor in my voice. "You're talking out of your hat, Timka. I'll fetch you one on the nob in a minute... I didn't go to school yesterday, Timka, I was running a temperature."

"Tweet-tweet... Trra-ra-ra..." Timka started whistling like a tit and hopped about on one leg, overjoyed at the fact that he was the first to tell me this news. "That's true, you weren't at school yesterday. Gee, you should have seen what happened!"

"What happened?"

"It was like this. We were sitting in the classroom. Our first lesson was French. The old hag made us do verbs in *être*. *Les verbes: aller, arriver, entrer, rester, tomber*. She called Rayevsky to the board. He'd just started to write *rester, tomber* when all of a sudden the door opens and in walks the Inspector (Timka flinched), the Headmaster (Timka threw me a meaningful look), and the form master. When we sat down the Headmaster says to us: 'Gentlemen, I have bad news for you. Spagin, a pupil of your form, has run away from home. He left a note saying that he had gone off to the German front. I can't imagine, gentlemen, that he has done this without the knowledge of his classmates. Many of you, of course, knew of this flight beforehand but did not take the trouble to bring it to my notice. I must tell you, gentlemen...' and he worked his chin for over half an hour."

I caught my breath. So that's what it was! To think that I had cheated pretending to be ill, when such things were happening, when there was such staggering news of which I knew nothing! And no one — neither

Yashka Zuckerstein nor Fedka Bashmakov — had dropped in after school to tell me about it. Pals, they call themselves! When Fedka needs fire caps for his toy pistol he comes to me for them. And this is what I get for it! Half the school will run off to the front, while I sit here like an idiot!

I charged into the school like a fire brigade, threw off my coat on the run, and giving the supervisor the slip, mixed with the crowd of boys coming out of the hall where prayers were held.

For days afterwards the school fairly buzzed with the news of Valka Spagin's heroic flight.

The Headmaster was mistaken in thinking that many of us had been let into the secret plan. As a matter of fact no one knew anything about it. It never entered anyone's head that Valka Spagin could run away. He was such a goody-goody, never got mixed up in any scraps or in raids on neighbours' orchards, he was always losing his trousers — in short, he was a poor yap. The last man on earth you'd expect to pull such a thing off! We all went into a huddle, tried to find out whether any of us had noticed preparations being made for the flight. Damn it all, a fellow couldn't just put on his cap on the spur of the moment and walk off to the front without warning.

Fedka Bashmakov remembered seeing Valka with a map of the railways.

Dubilov, the dunce, said he had run into Valka the other day in a shop, where he was buying a pocket-torch battery. No amount of questioning could elicit any further information pointing to secret preparations for the flight.

The class seethed with excitement. Everybody ran about, seemed to go haywire, gave irrelevant answers during lessons, while the number of pupils who were left without lunch those days was more than double the usual number. Several days went by. Then, all of a sudden, fresh news — Mitka Tupikov, a first-form boy, had run away.

The school authorities became alarmed in real earnest.

"There's going to be a talk today at Scripture," Fedka told me confidentially. "About all this running away. I heard them talking about it in the Teachers' Room when I went in there with the exercise-books."

Our clergyman, Father Gennady, was seventy if he was a day. Not an inch of face could be seen through the beard and eyebrows; he was stout, and to turn his head to look round he had to turn his whole body, as he had no neck to speak of.

The boys liked him. At his lessons you could do anything you liked — play cards, or draw pictures, or put a banned Nat Pinkerton or Sherlock Holmes on the desk in place of the Old Testament, because Father Gennady was short-sighted.

Father Gennady came into the classroom, his hand raised in blessing, and instantly the monitor roared:

"God the Father, The Comforter, The Spirit of Truth..."

Father Gennady was hard of hearing and always demanded that prayers should be read loudly and clearly, but even he thought the monitor was overdoing it that day. He waved his hand and said gruffly:

"Now, now... What's this? You must read with a pleasing voice, but you sound like a roaring bull."

Father Gennady began from afar. At first he related the parable of the prodigal son. That son, from what I could gather at the time, left his father to go travelling, but then, after roughing it, he back-pedalled.

Then he told us the parable of the talents — how a man gave his servants money, called talents, and how some of the servants went and traded and got a profit out of it, while others hid the money and got nothing.

"Now what do these parables say?" Father Gennady continued. "The first parable speaks of a disobedient son. That son left his father, wandered about for a long time, and in the end returned home under the parental roof. Need it be said that your classmates, who are not inured to the hardships of life and who secretly left their homes — need it be said what a bad time they will have of it on the ruinous path they have chosen. I plead with you again — if any one of you knows where they are, let him write to them they should not fear to come back while there is time to the parental home. Remember, in the parable when the prodigal son came home, his father, in his goodness, did not rebuke him, but clothed him in the finest garments and had the fatted calf killed as if it were a holiday. So will the parents of these two stray youths forgive them everything and receive them with open arms."

I had my doubts about these words. As to how the parents of Tupikov, the first-form pupil, would meet him, I didn't know, but that the baker Spagin would kill no fatted calf on the occasion of his son's return, but would simply give him a sound thrashing with his belt — of that I was certain.

"As for the parable of the talents," Father Gennady continued, "that

says that one must not bury one's gifts in the earth. You are learning all kinds of knowledge here. When you finish school each one of you will choose a profession according to his abilities, inclination and position. One of you will be, say, a respectable businessman, another a doctor, a third a civil servant. Everyone will respect you and say to himself: 'Yes, this worthy man did not bury his talents in the earth, but increased them and is now deservedly enjoying all the good things of life.' But what" — here Father Gennady raised his hands to heaven — "what, I ask you, will become of these and suchlike runaways, who, spurning all the opportunities offered them, have run away from home in search of adventure, calamitous alike for body and soul? You are growing like tender flowers in the hothouse of a loving gardener, you know neither life's storms nor cares, and you are blossoming peacefully, gladdening the eyes of your teachers and tutors. But they ... even if they do withstand all life's adversities, they will grow up, untended, into rank weeds, exposed to the winds and mixed with the roadside dust."

When Father Gennady, majestic and glowing with prophetic zeal, had sailed out of the classroom, I sighed and became thoughtful.

"Fedka!" I said.

"Yes?"

"What do you think about those talents?"

"Nothing. And you?"

"Me?"

I hesitated a moment, then added in a lower voice:

"If you ask me, Fedka, I'd have buried my talents too. What's the fun in being a businessman or a civil servant?"

"So would I," Fedka confessed after a slight pause. "What interest is there in growing up like a hothouse flower? Just spit at it and it'll wilt. Weeds, at least, are tougher — they can stand rain and heat."

"Fedka," I said, "what about Father Gennady saying: 'You shall answer in the life to come'? Who cares about the life to come if you have to answer all the same."

This took time to sink in. Fedka, too, seemed to have only a hazy idea of how to avoid the threatened punishment. His answer was evasive.

"But that won't be so soon. We'll work out something then."

That first-form chap Tupikov turned out to be a fool. He didn't even know in what direction you had to run to the front. They caught

him on the third day within sixty kilometres of Arzamas on the road to Nizhni Novgorod.

At home, people said, they made a terrible fuss of him, bought him all kinds of presents. He gave his mother his solemn word of honour never to run away again, and for this he was promised an air rifle in the summer. At school, however, Tupikov became an object of ridicule. "Who wouldn't agree to run around the town for three days and get a real rifle for it," the boys sneered.

Most unexpectedly, Tupikov got a wigging from our geography master Malinovsky, whom we called, behind his back, "the hell-roarer".

Malinovsky called Tupikov out to the blackboard.

"Well, well. Now tell me, young man, what front were you trying to run away to? The Japanese front, maybe?"

"No, sir," Tupikov answered, reddening. "The German front."

"I see," Malinovsky went on maliciously. "And what devil, may I ask you, made you steer for Nizhni Novgorod? Where is your head and in what place do you store the geography lessons that I give you? Isn't it as clear as a pikestaff that you had to go via Moscow?" — he jabbed at the map with his pointer — "via Smolensk and Brest, if you intended making for the German front? But you went toddling East, in the opposite direction. What made you go the other way? You are studying with me in order to be able to make practical use of the knowledge you gain, and not keep it in your head as if it were a dustbin. Sit down. I'm giving you bad marks. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man!"

The effect of this speech, it should be noted, was to suddenly bring home to the first-form boys the benefits of learning and make them study geography with surprising zeal. They even invented a new game, called "Runaway". The game consisted in one boy naming a frontier town, and another boy rattling off the principal points along the way.

If the Runaway made a mistake he paid a forfeit, and in default got a clump on the side of the head or a flip on the nose, as per arrangement.

CHAPTER THREE

Once a week, every Wednesday, a solemn prayer for victory was held in the hall before lessons.

After prayers everyone faced to the left where the portraits of the Tsar and Tsarina hung.

The choir started singing the national anthem "God Save the Tsar" and all the rest joined in. I sang at the top of my voice. My voice was not exactly made for singing, but I tried so hard that the master once told me:

"Take it a bit easier, Gorikov, you're overdoing it."

I got offended. What did he mean — overdoing it?

If I had no gift for singing, then I was to let others pray for victory while I stood mum — was that it?

At home I aired my grievance to my mother.

But Mother was cold about it and said:

"You're little yet. Grow up a bit... What if people *are* fighting. What's it got to do with you?"

"What do you mean, Ma? And say the Germans conquer us? I've read something about their atrocities, too, Ma. Why are the Germans such Huns that they don't care for anybody — old people, children — but our tsar cares for everybody?"

"Never mind that!" Mother said, displeased. "They're a fine lot, all of them. They've all gone mad — the Germans are no worse than other people, and so are ours."

Mother went away, leaving me to puzzle this out. How could the Germans be no worse than our people, when everyone knew they were? Only the other day, at the pictures, the Germans were shown burning everything, caring for no one. They destroyed the Reims Cathedral, desecrated the churches, but our people didn't destroy anything, didn't desecrate anything. On the contrary, at the same cinema, I saw a Russian officer saving a German baby from the fire. I went to Fedka.

Fedka agreed with me.

"Of course they're brutes. They sank the *Lusitania* with peaceful passengers on board, but we didn't sink anything. Our tsar and the English tsar are noble men. So's the French president. But that Wilhelm of theirs is a cad!"

"Fedka," I asked him, "why is the French tsar called a president?"

Fedka slowly digested this.

"I don't know," he said. "I heard that their president wasn't a tsar at all, but just ... just like that."

"Just like what?"

"I don't know, really. You know, I read a book by Dumas. Interesting book, chock-full of adventures. According to that book the French killed their tsar, and they've had a president instead of a tsar ever since."

"How can you kill a tsar?" I said, indignant. "You're a liar, Fedka, or else you've got it all mixed up."

"They killed him, it's a fact, killed him and killed his wife too. They put them all on trial and sentenced 'em to death."

"Oh, tell me another one! How can a tsar be tried? Take our judge, Ivan Fyodorovich — he tries thieves. The chap who broke Plushchikha's fence — he tried him. He tried Mitka the Gypsy for pinching a box of wafers from the monks. But he daren't try the tsar, because the tsar is chief over everybody."

"You can believe me or not!" Fedka said, turning sniffy. "When Sasha Goloveshkin is through with the book, I'll let you have it. The trial there was nothing like those of Ivan Fyodorovich's. There all the people gathered, and they passed judgement and carried out the execution. I even remember the way they executed them. They don't hang people there, they've got a machine — a guillotine. They wind it up, and before you can count two it chops your head off."

"And they chopped the tsar's head off too?"

"The tsar's and the tsarina's and other heads too. I'll let you have that book if you like. Very interesting. It tells about a monk too. A cunning fellow he was, fat, supposed to be holy, but in fact he was nothing of the sort. When I read about him I laughed till I cried. Mother was so angry, she got out of bed and blew out the lamp. But I waited till she had fallen asleep again and took the little icon lamp to read by."

A rumour spread that Austrian prisoners of war had arrived at the railway station. Fedka and I ran off there soon after school. The station was a long way out of town. You had to run by way of the cemetery, through the copse, then come out on to the road and cross a long winding ravine.

"What do you think, Fedka — are the prisoners of war in irons?"

"I don't know. Maybe they are. Shouldn't be surprised. Otherwise they'd do a bunk. But you can't run far in irons. You should see the jail prisoners, they barely drag their feet along."

"But those are convicts, thieves — the prisoners of war haven't stolen anything."

Fedka eyed me narrowly.

"You think people are in prison only for stealing or murdering somebody? They're doing time for all kinds o'things, my dear chap."

"What kind o' things?"

"Well, you know... What was our teacher of handicraft put in prison for? You don't know? Then shut up."

I always resented the fact that Fedka knew more than I did. No matter what you asked him about — so long as it wasn't lessons — he always knew something. Through his father, I suppose. His father was a postman, and postmen, during their rounds, picked up lots of news.

The boys were fond of their teacher of handicraft, whom they nicknamed Jackdaw. He came to our town at the beginning of the war. Rented lodgings on the outskirts. I visited him several times. He was fond of us boys, too. Taught us on his bench to make cages, boxes and traps. In the summer he'd collect a crowd of kids and go off with them into the woods or go fishing. He was a dark, skinny man and walked with a little hop, like a bird. That's why we called him Jackdaw.

They arrested him quite unexpectedly, we could never make out what for. Some boys said he was a spy who gave away all our secrets about troop movements to the Germans over the telephone. There were some who swore that our teacher was an ex-highwayman who robbed people on the public road, and now the truth had come to light.

But I didn't believe it. For one thing, you couldn't draw a telephone line all the way from here to the frontier. Secondly, what military secrets or troop movements were there to give away in Arzamas? There were hardly any troops here to speak of — just a party of seven men with a batman and four bakers of the Victualling Post at the railway station, who were soldiers only in name; actually, they were just ordinary bread-bakers. Besides, all this time there had been only one movement of troops — that was when the officer Balagushin moved from his lodgings at the Pyryatins to the Basyugins. There had been no other movements.

As to the teacher having been a highwayman, that was a barefaced lie. Petka Zolotukhin had made it up, and he, as everyone knew, was the world's biggest liar. If he asked for a loan of three kopeks he'd swear afterwards that he'd given them back, or else he'd return your fishing rod

without the hooks and swear he hadn't taken them. Besides, whoever heard of a teacher turning highwayman? He didn't have the face for it, he walked in such a funny way, and he was a kind man, a skinny one, besides, always coughing.

We ran, Fedka and I, till we came to the ravine. Here my curiosity got the better of me and I asked Fedka:

"No really, Fedka, what was the teacher arrested for? All that talk about being a spy and a highwayman is bosh, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," Fedka said, slowing down and looking round cautiously, as if we were in a crowd instead of a field. "He was arrested for politics, my dear chap."

Before I could ask Fedka for what politics exactly our teacher had been arrested, the heavy tramp of an approaching column reached our ears from around the bend.

There were about a hundred prisoners of war.

They weren't in irons and they were escorted by only six soldiers.

The Austrians' tired gloomy faces merged with their grey army coats and crumpled caps. They walked in silence, in closed ranks, with the measured tread of soldiers.

"So that's what they're like," Fedka and I thought, as we watched the column go past. "So these are those Austrians and Germans whose atrocities have shocked all nations. Scowling, eh? Don't like the idea of being prisoners of war? Serves you jolly well right!"

When the column had passed Fedka shook a fist at it.

"Invented poison gas, the damned German sausages!"

We returned home somewhat depressed. Why, I couldn't say. Maybe because those tired grey-faced prisoners of war had not impressed us the way we thought they would. But for their army coats they might have been taken for refugees. The same gaunt emaciated faces, the same weariness and utter apathy to everything around them.

CHAPTER FOUR

We broke up for the summer. Fedka and I were full of plans for spending the holidays. There was lots of work to do.

In the first place, a raft had to be built and launched in the pond adjoining

our garden, and we had to proclaim ourselves Ruler of the Seas and give battle to the joint fleet of the Pantushkins and Simakovs guarding the approaches to their orchards on the opposite shore.

We had a small home fleet in the shape of a garden wicket, but it was considerably inferior in battle efficiency to the forces of the enemy, who had half of an old gate serving as a heavy cruiser and a light torpedo boat made out of a log-built trough formerly used to feed the farm animals.

The forces were obviously unequal. And so we decided to increase our naval strength by building a colossal super-dreadnought, the latest word in engineering.

We intended using the logs of the broken-down bath-house as material for our construction. To avoid a scolding, I promised Mother that our dreadnought would be built on such lines that it could always be used as a platform for rinsing the washing.

On the opposite shore, the enemy, noticing our rearmament activities, became alarmed and started building too, but our intelligence reported that the enemy was no serious match for us in this respect owing to lack of building materials. Their attempt to pinch some planks in the yard, which were intended for weather-boarding the barn, was a failure. The domestic council disapproved of such unauthorised use of material earmarked for other purposes, and the enemy's admirals — Senka Pantushkin and Grishka Simakov — got a sound thrashing from their fathers.

We spent several days messing about with those logs. Building a dreadnought was no easy job. It demanded a lot of money and time, and as it happened Fedka and I had hit a bad patch just then. We spent over fifty kopeks on nails alone, and we still had to buy rope for the anchor and material for the flag.

To raise the necessary funds we had to resort to a secret loan of seventy kopeks on the security of two text-books on religion, a German grammar and a Russian reader.

But then our dreadnought, when completed, was a beauty. We launched her late in the afternoon. Timka Shtukin and Yashka Zuckerstein gave a hand with the launching. All the bootmaker's kids, my sister and the little watchdog Volchok, alias Sharik, alias Zhuchka, acted as spectators. The raft, creaking and groaning, dropped into the water with a heavy splash. Amid loud cheers and the firing of toy pistols the ship's flag was hoisted to the mast.

Our flag was a black one with red edging and a blue circle in the middle. Fluttering in the warm breeze, it made a brave display as we weighed anchor and shoved off.

It was getting near sundown. One could hear the distant tinkle of the bells of the homecoming herd of goats, of which Arzamas had countless numbers.

The dreadnought was manned by me and Fedka. Behind us, at a respectable distance, sailed our little wicket gate, serving as a dispatch boat.

Our squadron, fully aware of its strength, sailed out into the middle of the pond and cruised down the enemy shore. In vain did we challenge the enemy by means of speaking trumpet and signals — he refused to accept battle and hid shamefully in the bay under a half-rotten bough. In a fit of impotent fury the coastal artillery opened fire upon our ships, but we immediately placed ourselves out of range of the enemy's guns and coolly put into harbour without suffering any damage, not counting a slight shock caused by a potato which hit Yashka Zuckerstein in the back.

"O-ho-ho!" we shouted as we sailed away. "You haven't got the guts to come out and fight!"

"You wait! We'll come out all right. You needn't boast. You can't frighten us."

"Tell it to the marines! Fraidy-cats, that's what you are!"

We safely entered harbour, cast anchor, and, making our rafts fast by chains, jumped ashore.

That evening Fedka and I very nearly quarrelled. We hadn't made arrangements beforehand who was to command the fleet. My suggestion that Fedka should command the dispatch boat was turned down with a scornful spit. So then I offered him, in addition, to be harbour master, chief of the coastal artillery and chief of the air force, as soon as we got one. But not even the post of air force chief tempted Fedka, who insisted on being admiral, otherwise he threatened to go over to the enemy.

Not wishing to lose a valuable assistant, I finally gave in and suggested we should be admirals in turn — one day he, the next I.

And so we decided.

We made two bows, provided ourselves with a dozen arrows and went off into the wood. We had a stock of several "frogs". A "frog" was a tube of rolled up paper laced tight with a bit of string and stuffed with a

mixture of potassium chlorate and ground charcoal. We tied the "frog" to the end of the arrow and lighted the fuse. The arrow shot up into the sky and the "frog" exploded high in the air, darting about in fiery zigzags and frightening all the jackdaws and crows.

The copse adjoined the cemetery. It was densely-wooded, pitted with holes and covered with small ponds. Yellow waterlilies, buttercups and ferns grew in the shady green glades.

Having played to our heart's content, we clambered over the wall and found ourselves in a remote corner of the cemetery. The stillness, broken only by the twitter of birds concealed in the foliage, had a soothing effect upon us after the excitement of play. We spoke in low tones as we made our way through a patch of waste land, passing burial mounds, which sometimes barely rose above the ground.

"Look," I said to Fedka, "we'll come to soldiers' graves in a minute round the corner. Last week they buried Semyon Kozhevnikov here from the hospital. I remember Kozhevnikov very well, Fedka. Long before the war, when I was still a little boy, he used to come to my father. Once he gave me a piece of elastic for a slingshot. Good elastic it was. Only my mother threw it in the fire afterwards, when the Basyugins got one of their windows smashed by a stone. She blamed me for it."

"Didn't you do it?"

"What if I did? It had to be proved, but no one saw me do it. It was just bare suspicion. D'you call that fair? Say it hadn't been me who smashed that window — I'd be blamed all the same?"

"You would," Fedka concurred. "Mothers are all alike. They'll never touch a girl's things, but if they catch a boy playing with anything they'll chuck it out. My mother broke two of my arrows with nails in them and afterwards took the rat out of the trap. Once it was still worse. I unscrewed an empty knob — you know, one of those gadgets they adorn beds with. Mother had gone to church. I sat there, got out some saltpetre and charcoal. I'll fill that knob with gunpowder, I says to myself, and then I'll go out into the wood and make an explosion. I was so busy at it that I didn't notice Mother come up behind me. 'What did you unscrew that knob for?' she says. 'Oh, you devil! And I was wondering where that knob could have got to.' And she fetched me one over the ear. Luckily, Father took my part. 'What did you take the knob for?' he asks. 'Can't you see?' I says, 'I'm making a bomb.' He frowned. 'Drop that,' he says, 'don't

lark about with such things. How do you like that terrorist!' But he laughed and patted me on the head."

"Fedka," I said calmly, "I know what a terrorist is. It's one of those who throw bombs at the police and who go against the rich. What are we, Fedka, poor or rich?"

"In-between," Fedka answered after a thoughtful pause. "I wouldn't say we're very poor. Since Father got a job we have dinner every day, and on Sunday Mother makes a pie and sometimes stewed fruit. I'm terribly fond of stewed fruit. Aren't you?"

"So am I. But I like apple-jelly better. I think we're somewhere in-between too. Look at the Bebeshins — they own a whole factory. I went to their home once to see their Vaska. The number of servants they have! And Vaska's father gave him a real live horse for a present — a pony they call it."

"They've got everything, of course," Fedka concurred. "They've got tons of money. The merchant Sinyugin built a tower over his house and put a telescope in. A whopper! When he's fed up with things on earth he goes to his tower, and they bring him snacks there, and a bottle... And he sits there all night, looking at the stars and planets. The other day, though, he had a drinking party there with his pals, and they say some glass or other got broken after the observations, and now there's nothing to see any more."

"Fedka, why is it that Sinyugin has all the enjoyment, what with the stars and the planets, while others get nix? Take Sigov, who works at his factory — he has nothing to eat, let alone gazing at the planets. Yesterday he came downstairs to borrow fifty kopeks from the bootmaker."

"How do I know? Don't ask me. Ask the teacher or the clergyman."

Fedka broke off a sprig of wild jasmine as he walked along, then added in a lower voice:

"Father said everything will soon change the other way."

"What will?"

"Everything. I haven't got this straight myself yet, Boris. I was supposed to be sleeping but I only made as if I was. Father was talking to the factory watchman about strikes starting again, like in nineteen 'five. You know what happened in nineteen 'five?"

"I do, but not quite," I answered, reddening.

"There was a revolution. Only it failed. The idea was to turn out the

landowners, give all the land to the peasants and take everything from the rich for the poor. You know, I heard all this from their conversation."

Fedka fell silent. And again I felt rattled that Fedka knew more than I did. I could get to know it, too, but there was no one to get it from. There was nothing about this in books. And no one talked to me about these things.

At home, after dinner, when Mother lay down to rest, I sat down beside her on the bed and said:

"Mamma, tell me something about nineteen 'five. Why do parents speak to other boys about it? Fedka knows so many interesting things, but I never know anything."

My mother turned round quickly with a frown. She looked as if she was going to scold me, but changed her mind and eyed me curiously as if she were seeing me for the first time.

"Nineteen 'five? What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. Look how old you are. You must have been quite grown-up at the time, but I was only a year old, and I don't remember anything."

"What can I tell you? You should ask your father, he's a great one for telling stories. I had a beast of a time in nineteen 'five through you, you little monkey. You were a holy terror, forever screaming — I didn't have a minute's peace. When you'd start screaming the whole blessed night, I'd forget who I was and what world I live in."

"Why did I scream, Mamma?" I asked, feeling a little hurt. "Maybe I was frightened? They say there was shooting and Cossacks. Maybe I got scared?"

"Scared your grandmother! You were just a capricious squalling brat, that's all. You couldn't know what it was to get frightened. One night the gendarmes came to search our place. What they were looking for I don't know. They were carrying out regular searches in those days. They turned the place upside down, but didn't find anything. The officer was ever so polite. Tickled you with a finger and you laughed. 'Fine boy you've got there,' he says. He picked you up, sort of playfully, while he winked to the gendarme, who started to search your cradle. And suddenly you began to make water. Goodness gracious, right on that officer's uniform! I snatched you away and thrust a rag at the officer to wipe himself with. Just imagine, a new uniform he had on, and it was all soaking

wet, dripped onto his trousers, too, even his sword. You gave him a proper douche, you little rascal!" Mother laughed at the memory.

"You're telling me about something quite different, Ma," I interrupted, now deeply offended. "I asked you about the revolution and you tell me some kind of nonsense —"

"Oh, leave me alone. You're a nuisance!" Mother said, dismissing the matter.

But seeing my pained look, she paused, then got out a bunch of keys and said:

"I shan't tell you anything. Go and open the lumber-room. There's a big box there with all kinds of junk on top. Underneath them there ought to be a heap of books belonging to your father. Search among them. If he hasn't torn them all up you may find one about nineteen 'five."

I quickly seized the bunch of keys and made for the door. My mother's voice shouted a warning:

"If you get into a jar of jam instead of that box of books, or spoon the cream off the milk like you did last time, I'll give you such a taste of revolution that you'll never forget it!"

I spent several days in succession reading. I remember, in the first of the two books I had selected I read only three pages. This book, chosen at random, was entitled *The Philosophy of Poverty*. I could make nothing of this headachy stuff at the time. But the other book — stories by Stepnyak-Kravchinsky — was something I could understand, and I read it right through and reread it a second time.

Everything in these stories was the other way round. The heroes there were people the police were after, and the police sleuths, instead of arousing sympathy, provoked only contempt and indignation. These stories were about revolutionaries. The revolutionaries had their secret organisations and printing shops. They were preparing an uprising against the landowners, merchants and generals. The police fought them and hunted them. The revolutionaries then went to prison or faced the firing squad, while those who remained alive carried on their cause.

This book gripped me, because I had never read anything about revolutionaries before. I was so sorry that this Arzamas of ours was such a one-horse town and one never heard anything about revolutionaries in it. There were burglars — the Tushkovs had their attic with all the

washing in it cleaned out; there were gypsy horse-thieves, and even a real robber — Vanka Seledkin, who killed the exciseman, but there were no revolutionaries.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fedka, Timka, Yashka Zuckerstein and me were just about to start playing *gorodki** when the bootmaker's boy came running out of the garden reporting that two rafts of the Pantushkins and Simakovs had secretly moored at our shore and that those rascally admirals were now engaged in knocking the padlock off our rafts in order to tow them away to their side.

We dashed into the garden with wild yells. At the sight of us the enemy jumped onto their rafts and shoved off.

We decided to pursue the enemy and sink him.

That day Fedka was in command of the dreadnought. While he and Yashka were pushing off the unwieldy heavy raft Timka and I set off in our old tub to cut across the enemy's path. Our enemies made a mistake at the very outset. They evidently did not think that we would pursue them, and instead of steering straight for their own shore, they edged far off to the left. When they did notice their mistake they were already far offshore and were now exerting every effort to make a dash for it before we had time to cut off their retreat. Fedka and Yashka, however, were still struggling to untie the big raft. Timka and I were faced with a heroic task — that of holding up the superior enemy force for several minutes with our light vessel.

We found ourselves confronted, unsupported, by the enemy fleet and courageously opened fire upon it. It goes without saying that we immediately came under a heavy shelling from two sides.

I had been hit in the back twice with clods of earth and Timka had had his cap knocked off into the water. Our ammunition was giving out and we were drenched to the skin, but Fedka and Yashka were only just getting under way.

Seeing this, the enemy decided to make a breakthrough. We stood no

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* *Gorodki* — a Russian game resembling skittles.— *Tr.*

chance in a head-on clash with their rafts. Our wicket would have been sunk as sure as anything.

"Blaze away with our last shells!" I commanded.

We held the enemy up for only half a minute with our deadly volleys. Our dreadnought was coming to the rescue at full speed.

"Hold on!" Fedka yelled, opening up at long range.

The enemy ships, however, were almost alongside. Only two courses were open to me — to let them get away to their home base or to block their path at the risk of a deadly engagement. I chose the latter course.

With a powerful thrust of my pole I placed our raft across their path.

The first enemy raft ran into us with a heavy bump and Timka and I found ourselves neck-deep in the warm stagnant water. But the enemy's raft, too, stopped from the blow. This was just what we wanted. Our powerful dreadnought — huge, clumsy, but sturdily built — ran head on into the side of the enemy's ship and overset it. There now remained the torpedo boat, originally the pig trough, to be tackled. Taking advantage of her high speed, she tried to slip past, but I tipped her over with my pole.

Timka and I clambered onto Fedka's dreadnought, and now only the heads of the enemy crew stuck out of the water.

We were magnanimous, however. We took the capsized raft in tow, allowing their vanquished crews to board them, and made a triumphant entry into our harbour with the trophies and prisoners of war amid the loud shouts and cheering of the small boys, who straddled the garden fences.

We rarely received letters from Father. And when he did write it was always one and the same thing: "I am alive and well, and sitting in the trenches, and I see no end to it."

I found his letters disappointing. No, really! Fancy a man being at the front and having nothing interesting to write about! Couldn't he describe a battle, say, an attack or some other heroic deed? Reading one of these letters gave you the impression that things were more boring at the front than they were in Arzamas in muddy autumn.

Why could others — Ensign Tupikov, for instance, Mitka's brother — write home letters describing battles and deeds of valour, and send photographs every week? On one he was photographed next to a field

gun, on another next to a machine-gun, on a third on horseback with a drawn sword, and there was even one picturing him with his head stuck out of an aeroplane. But Father never had himself photographed in the trenches, leave alone looking out of an aeroplane, and he never wrote home anything interesting.

One day, towards evening, there was a knock on our door. A soldier with a crutch and a wooden leg came in and asked for Mother. She wasn't at home but I was expecting her soon. The soldier then said that he was a comrade of my father's, they were serving in the same regiment, and now he was going home for good to a village in our district, and had brought us greetings and a letter from Father.

He sat down on a chair, placing his crutch against the stove, and after rummaging about in his inside pocket, produced from there a greasy letter.

The bulkiness of the packet surprised me. Father had never sent us such thick letters, and I decided that the packet probably contained some photographs.

"You served with him in the same regiment?" I asked, gazing curiously at the soldier's thin, gloomy-looking face, his grey rumpled greatcoat with the St. George's Cross and the wooden peg strapped to his left leg.

"Not only in the same regiment, but in the same company and the same platoon, and side by side in the same trench, elbow to elbow. You'll be his son, I take it?"

"Yes."

"I see. Boris, eh? I know you. Heard about you from your father. There's a package for you too. Only your father said you were to hide it and not touch it until he came back."

The soldier reached for a home-made leather bag cut from the top of a highboot. With every movement of his a wave of strong-smelling iodoform spread through the room.

He got out a package wrapped in a piece of cloth and tightly tied with string and gave it to me. It was a small package, but a heavy one. I wanted to open it but the soldier said:

"Don't be in a hurry. You've got plenty o' time."

"Well, how are things at the front, how's the fighting, what's the spirit of our troops?" I enquired calmly and solidly.

The soldier glanced at me quizzically. His heavy, somewhat mocking

glance was disconcerting, and my own question struck me as being rather pompous and silly.

"Spirit, did you say?" the soldier smiled. "I don't know about the spirit, but the smell's pretty thick. What can you expect in the trenches? Worse'n a backhouse."

He got out a tobacco pouch, rolled himself a cigarette and blew out a strong puff of acrid makhorka smoke. Looking past me at the window, which reflected the glow of sunset, he resumed:

"Everyone's fed up to the neck with it. And there's no end in sight."

Mother came in. Seeing the soldier, she stopped in the doorway and gripped the frame of the door.

"What ... what's the matter?" she asked quietly with blanched lips. "Is it about Alexei?"

"Daddy has sent us a letter!" I yelled. "A thick 'un. Probably with photographs. And he's sent me a present too."

"Is he alive and well?" Mother asked, throwing off her shawl. "When I saw a grey coat from the threshold my heart went cold. Something must have happened to Father, I thought."

"Nothing's happened so far," the soldier said. "He sends greetings, asked me to deliver this packet. He didn't want to send it by post. The post is unreliable these days."

Mother tore open the envelope. There were no photographs in it at all, only a batch of greasy close-written sheets of paper.

One of them had a bit of clay and a green dried blade of grass sticking to it.

I opened my package. Inside it lay a small Mauser with a spare clip.

"What's your father thinking of!" Mother said, displeased. "That's no toy!"

"Never mind," the soldier said. "Your son's not daft, is he? Just look at him, almost as big as I am. Let him hide it for the time being. It's a good pistol. Alexei found it in a German trench. Nice gadget. It may come in useful."

I touched the cold smooth handle, and carefully wrapping the Mauser up again, put it away in a drawer.

The soldier had tea with us. He drank glass after glass and kept telling us all about Father and about the war. I drank only half a glass, and Mother did not even touch her cup. She rummaged among her bottles and

phials and fished out a small bottle with alcohol and poured it out for the soldier. He diluted it with water, then slowly drank it off. He sighed and shook his head.

"Life's gone all awry," he said, pushing the glass away. "They wrote me from home that the farm's gone to the dogs. But what could I do to help 'em? We went hungry ourselves for months at a stretch. You felt as miserable as sin, wished it was all over, one way or another. People have had all they can stand. Sometimes you feel everything boiling inside o' you like rusty water in a billy-can. You think — ugh, if I only had the guts to chuck it all up and walk out. Let 'em fight if they want, but I don't owe Jerry anything and he doesn't owe me anything. Alexei and I talked about this a lot. The nights are long, you know. The fleas don't let you get any sleep. Your only comfort is singing or talking. Sometimes you feel like crying or strangling somebody, but you sit down and start singing. The tears have dried up. You feel like taking it out on somebody, but you just try! So you say, ah well, mates, buddies, dear comrades, let's have a song!"

The soldier's face reddened and became covered with moisture, and the smell of iodoform spread more and more thickly through the room. I opened the window. The air flooded in, bringing the smells of evening freshness, stacked hay in the yards and overripe cherries.

I sat on the window-sill, tracing patterns on the glass with a finger and listening to what the soldier was saying. His words left a sediment of dry bitter dust on my heart, and that dust gradually formed a thick coating over all my notions about the war, its sacred meaning and its heroes, all of which had been so clear-cut and intelligible to me until then. I looked at the soldier almost with hatred. He took off his belt and unbuttoned the wet collar of his shirt. He continued, evidently a bit tipsy:

"Death's bad, of course. But it's not death that makes war bad, it's the sense o' wrong. You don't feel that with death. Every man has to die, sooner or later — you can't help that, it's a law. But who thought up a law that you've got to fight? I didn't, you didn't, he didn't, but somebody did. Now if God were all-powerful, all-merciful and all-wise, the way they write about Him in books, He'd call that man up on the carpet and say: 'Now answer me this — what made you plunge these millions of peoples into war for? What do they stand to gain by it and what do you? Now then, come clean, so that everyone should know what it's all about.'

Only" — here the soldier swayed and all but dropped the glass — "only God doesn't like to interfere in earthly matters. Ah, well, we can wait. We're a patient people. But when our patience wears thin, we'll go out ourselves and find the judges as well as the guilty parties."

The soldier fell silent and threw a sullen look at Mother, who, with eyes lowered to the tablecloth, had not uttered a word all the time. He got up and reached for the plate with the herring, saying in a conciliatory tone:

"Oh, I say! What a thing to be talking about! Never mind... There'll come a time for everything. Is there anything left in the bottle, my good woman?"

Mother, without looking up, replenished his glass with drops of the warm odorous spirits.

Mother cried all that night behind the partition; I could hear the crackle of the sheets of Father's letter being turned over. Afterwards a dim greenish light shone through the crack and I guessed that Mother was praying before the icon with the little oil lamp over it. She did not show me Father's letter. What he wrote about and why she cried that night I did not know at the time.

The soldier went away in the morning.

Before leaving, he patted me on the shoulder and said, as though I had asked him something:

"Never mind, lad... You're still young. Ah, you'll see a sight more than we did, I daresay!"

He took his leave and stumped off, taking away with him his crutch, the smell of iodoform and the depressing mood evoked by his presence, his coughing laugh and his bitter words.

CHAPTER SIX

Summer was drawing to a close. Fedka was working hard for his re-examination, Yashka Zuckerstein was down with the fever, and I suddenly found myself alone.

I lolled on the bed, reading Father's books and the newspapers.

Nothing was to be heard about the war ending. The town was full of refugees, as the Germans had pushed forward along the front and already

occupied over half of Poland. The richer refugees put up in private houses and flats, but these were few. Our merchants, monks and clergymen were pious people who were reluctant to take in refugees, most of them poor Jews with large families, and so most of the refugees lived in bunk-houses near the wood, outside the town.

By this time all the young men in the villages, all the healthy men, had been driven off to the front. Many farms were ruined. There was nobody to work the fields, and beggars started drifting into town — old men and women and children.

Previously, you could walk about the streets all day without meeting a stranger. You might not have known this or that person's name, but you were bound to have met him before, but now at every step you met with strangers, unfamiliar faces — Jews, Rumanians, Poles, Austrian prisoners of war, and wounded soldiers from the Red Cross hospital.

There was a food shortage. Butter, eggs and milk were bought up at high prices on the market early in the morning. There were queues outside the baker's, white bread had disappeared, and there was not enough black bread to go round. The tradesmen kept pushing up the prices on everything unmercifully, even on things apart from foodstuffs.

People said that Bebeshin alone had made more money in the last year than he had in five previous years. As for Sinyugin, he had grown so rich that he donated six thousand rubles towards a church, had neglected his tower with the telescope and had had delivered to him from Moscow a real live crocodile, which he turned into a pool specially built for it.

When the crocodile was being transported from the railway station there was such a big crowd of curious people following the cart that Grishka Bocharov, the cross-eyed sexton of the Church of the Saviour, took it for a religious procession carrying the Oransk icon of Our Lady, and started to ring the bells. Grishka got thirteen days' penance for it from the bishop. Many churchgoers said that Grishka was lying when he said he had started ringing by mistake; he had done it on purpose, they said, out of sheer mischief. Doing penance was not enough for him. He should have been put in jail and made an example of. It was one thing to take a funeral, say, for a religious procession, but to take such a loathsome beast for a holy image was a deadly sin.

...I closed the book and went out into the street. Having nothing to do, I ran off to the cemetery outside the town to see Timka Shtukin. Timka was out. His father, a grey-headed sturdy old man, an old acquaintance of my father's, patted me on the back, saying:

"Growing up, laddie? Your dad won't know you when he gets back. You take after your father — big, strapping fellow you'll be! That Timka of mine's an undersized little wasp, worse luck. Takes after his grandad on his mother's side, I daresay. And the food he puts away! Father keeping well? Give him my regards when you write him. A real good man, he is. He and I worked together for eight years in a village school. He was teacher, I was caretaker. But that was a long time ago... You were a suckling, you wouldn't remember. Well, well, run along. Timka's hereabouts somewhere, catching goldfinches. Look for him among the birches, in the corner, back of the soldiers' graves. He doesn't do his bird-catching nearer — the church-warden scolds him if he sees it."

I found Timka in the birch wood. He was standing under a tree, holding a stick with a loop at the end of it and carefully moving it towards a goldfinch which was barely perceptible among the yellowing foliage. Timka threw me a scared, almost pleading look and shook his head vigorously as a warning not to come any closer and frighten the bird away. I stopped.

If you ask me, there is no greater fool of a bird in all the world than the goldfinch. The boys tie a length of horsehair in the form of a loop to the tip of a long rod. This loop has to be carefully slipped over the neck of the bird.

Timka slowly moved the tip of the rod towards the finch. It cocked an eye at the loop and lazily hopped onto a nearby branch. With his tongue stuck out, holding his breath, Timka started to move the loop up again. The silly finch eyed Timka's occupation with curiosity. With idiotic indifference it let the loop slip over its ruffled head. Timka jerked the stick, and the half-strangled finch, without as much as a squeak, flopped into the grass with a wild flutter of wings. A minute later it was hopping about in a cage together with five other captive companions.

"See that!" Timka yelled, dancing about on one leg. "Smart work, that! Six of 'em. Only they're all finches. You can't catch a tit like that. You've got to use traps and snares. They're a cunning lot! But these fools just stick their heads in —"

Timka suddenly broke off and his face froze into a stony expression as if someone had given him a crack on the head with a thick stick. He held up a warning finger and stood without stirring for fully two minutes, then gave another hop and said:

"Well, did you hear it?"

"Hear what, Timka? I only heard the engine hooting at the railway station."

"Holy Moses! He didn't hear anything!" Timka said, throwing his hands up in astonishment. "Robin! Didn't you hear him give a warble? A real redbreast. I've been after him for over a week. You know where that drowned man was buried? Well, he nests there, somewhere among the maples. They grow dense there, and their leaves now are like a flame, ever so brilliant. Let's go and have a look."

Timka knew every grave, every tombstone. Hopping along bird-like, he kept up a running commentary.

"Here lies the fireman — the one who died of burns last year, and here the blind man Churbakin. They're all that kind o' people here. Merchants are not buried here, they have a special site of good land. Look at that statue with the Archangels they've put up to Sinyugin's grandmother. And here" — Timka jerked a thumb at a barely perceptible mound — "here lies a suicide man. Dad said he hanged himself — did it on purpose. He was a fitter at the depot. I can't understand how a man can hang himself on purpose."

"Through a bad life, I suppose, not through a good one, Timka, surely?"

"What d'you mean!" Timka protested, looking surprised. "It isn't bad, surely?"

"What isn't?"

"Life isn't! Life's a jolly good thing. How can death be better? You run about, do whatever you like, and here you've got to lie quiet!"

Timka laughed a ringing rippling laugh and abruptly broke off again with a sort of stunned look. After a minute's silence he whispered:

"Quiet now. He's somewhere near. Hiding himself, the cunning little thing! All the same, I'll catch him."

I stayed with Timka till late in the afternoon. A funny boy, Timka. He was only a year and a half younger than me, but so small that you wouldn't give him ten, let alone twelve years. He was such a fusspot, his classmates always made fun of him and often gave him fillips on the

back of his head, but he never got offended, at least not for long. When Timka asked for anything, a penknife, say, to sharpen a pencil with, or a nib, or for help in doing a difficult sum, he always looked you straight in the face with big round eyes and a sort of apologetic smile. He was a coward, but his cowardice was of a special kind. The approach of the Inspector or the Headmaster terrified him beyond words. Once, during a lesson, the porter came in and said that Timka was wanted in the Teachers' Room. Timka sat frozen to his seat and when he did get up he slowly passed an eye round the class as if asking: "What have I done? Honour bright, I didn't do anything!" His slightly pock-marked face turned ashen with fear, and he walked out unsteadily.

At playtime we learned that he had been sent for not to be put into irons and packed off to a convict's prison, and not even to be put on the list of conduct, but simply to sign for the textbook on arithmetic which he had received free of charge the year before.

Two days later school was resumed. The classrooms were full of hubbub. Everyone was telling how he had spent the summer, how much fish, crabs, lizards and hedgehogs he had caught. One boasted of having killed a hawk, another gave an excited account of mushrooms and wild strawberries collected in the woods, and a third swore that he had caught a live snake. There were even some who had spent the summer in the Crimea and the Caucasus, at health resorts. But these were only a few. They kept aloof, did not talk about hedgehogs or wild strawberries, but carried on a dignified conversation about palm-trees, bathing and horses.

That year, for the first time, we were told that life being so dear the guardians had allowed us to wear uniforms made of a cheaper material instead of the usual woollen cloth.

Mother made me a tunic and trousers out of stuff called Devil's Hide.

It must have really been the hide off a devil's back, because one day, during a raid on the monastery orchard, when a great hulking fellow of a monk chased me with a stick, my trousers got caught in a nail as I was scrambling over the wall, and they didn't tear, but kept me hanging conveniently from the wall while the monk planted a couple of painful blows.

There was another innovation. An officer was attached to us, we were given wooden rifles that looked like real ones and started military drilling.

After that letter which the one-legged soldier had brought us, we did not receive a single letter from Father. Every time Fedka's father passed down the street with his postman's bag, my little sister, who stood looking out for him would poke a head out of the window and shout in a shrill voice:

"Uncle Sergei! Anything from Daddy?"

And the invariable answer would be:

"No girlie, not today. There'll be one tomorrow, I'm sure."

But tomorrow, too, there would be nothing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

One day — it was already September — Fedka sat with me till late in the evening. We were doing our lessons together.

We had scarcely finished and Fedka put his books away to run home when a heavy downpour suddenly started.

I ran to shut the window overlooking the garden.

The gusts of wind raised heaps of dried fallen leaves. Several big drops fell on my face.

I pulled one half of the window shut with difficulty and leaned out for the second when a pretty large lump of clay dropped on the window-sill.

"Some wind!" I thought. "Likely to break all the trees!"

Coming back into the room I said to Fedka:

"It's regular storm. Where are you going, you silly ass? It's raining cats and dogs! Look at this lump of clay the wind sent flying into the window."

Fedka looked at it sceptically.

"Tell me another one! How can the wind send a lump like that flying?"

"You think I'm fibbing?" I said, offended. "I'm telling you, I was just shutting the window when it flopped onto the window-sill."

I looked at the lump of clay. Maybe someone did throw it on purpose?

But I immediately dismissed the thought and said:

"Nonsense! Who could have thrown it? Who could be in the garden in such weather? It was the wind, of course."

Mother was sitting in the next room, sewing. My sister was sleeping. Fedka sat on for another half-hour. The sky cleared. The moon peeped into the room through the wet window and the wind began to drop.

"Well, I'll run along," Fedka said.

"All right. I won't lock the door after you. Shut it tight, it'll lock itself."

Fedka jammed his cap on, thrust the books under his coat not to get them wet, and went away. I heard the door bang to as he went out.

I began to take my boots off to go to bed. Looking down on the floor I saw an exercise-book which Fedka had dropped and forgotten. It was the book in which we had been doing our sums.

"The stupid!" I thought. "Tomorrow we're having algebra — our first lesson. I'll have to take it with me." Throwing off my clothes I slipped under the blanket, and was about to turn over on my side when the doorbell rang softly and cautiously.

"Who can that be?" Mother said, wonderingly. "A telegram from Father perhaps? No, the postman always rings the bell twice. Go and open the door."

"I've undressed, Ma. It must be Fedka, he's forgotten an exercise-book here and must have remembered it on his way home — he'll need it tomorrow."

"He's a nuisance!" Mother said. "Couldn't he have come for it in the morning? Where is that book?"

She picked up the exercise-book and went out with her slippers on her bare feet.

I could hear her slippers shuffling down the stairs. The lock clicked. In the same instant a muffled cry reached my ears. I jumped up. For the moment I thought it was burglars and seized a candlestick from the table to smash the window and call for help. But from downstairs came the mingled sound of laughter and kisses, and subdued whispering. Then two pairs of feet came shuffling up the stairs.

The door was thrown open, and I sat as if glued to the bed, undressed, with the candlestick in my hand.

In the doorway, her eyes filled with tears, stood my happy laughing mother, and at her side, overgrown with bristly beard, besmeared with

clay and wringing wet, the dearest soldier in the world to me — my father.

In a bound I flung myself into his strong hugging arms.

Behind the partition my sister stirred in her bed, disturbed by the noise. I wanted to run in and wake her, but Father restrained me and said in a low voice:

"Don't, Boris ... don't wake her ... and don't make too much noise."

Then he turned to Mother.

"Varya, if the child wakes up don't tell her I have come. Let her sleep. Where could we send her for a couple of days?"

"We'll send her to Ivanovskoye early in the morning," Mother said. "She's been asking a long time to go and stay with Grandma. The sky has cleared, I believe. Boris will take her down first thing in the morning. You needn't speak in a whisper, Alexei, she's a heavy sleeper. They sometimes come for me at night from the hospital, so she's used to it."

I stood open-mouthed, refusing to believe what I had heard.

"What?" I thought. "They want to pack little saucer-eyed Tanya off to Grandma's at peep of dawn, so's she won't be able to see Daddy, who has come home on leave? What can it mean?"

"You'll go to bed in my room, Boris," Mother said, "and tomorrow morning, round about six, you'll take Tanya down to Grandma's. And don't tell anyone there that Daddy's come home."

I looked at Father. He pressed me to him and was going to say something, but changed his mind. He hugged me still closer.

I lay down on Mother's bed, while Father and Mother remained in the dining-room and shut the door. For a long time I couldn't fall asleep. I turned over from side to side and tried counting up to fifty, up to a hundred, but it didn't help.

In my head was chaos. The moment I dwelt on what had happened all kinds of thoughts thronged confusedly in my mind, which floated in a sea of conjectures, each more absurd than the other. I felt a tightness at the temples like the pressure on one's head after too long a ride on the merry-go-round.

I didn't doze off until late in the night. A faint creaking sound woke me up. Father came into the room with a lighted candle.

I half-opened my eyes. Father was in his socks. Stepping softly, he went over to Tanya's cot and lowered the candle.

He stood there for about three minutes, gazing at the fair curls and rosy face of his sleeping daughter. Then he bent over her. Two emotions struggled within him — the desire to fondle his daughter and the fear of wakening her. The second gained the upper hand. Swiftly, he straightened his back, turned and left the room.

The door creaked again and the room went dark.

The clock struck seven. I opened my eyes. A bright sun shone through the yellow leaves of the birch tree outside the window. I dressed quickly and looked into the next room. They were asleep in there. I shut the door and began to wake my sister.

"And where's Mummy?" she asked rubbing her eyes and staring at the empty bed.

"Mummy's been called out to the hospital. She told me when she was going away I should take you down to Grandma's."

"Oh, what a fibber you are, Borya!" my sister said, laughing and wagging a finger at me. "Only yesterday Grandma asked me to stay with her, but Mummy wouldn't let me."

"Yesterday she wouldn't, but today she's changed her mind. Dress yourself quickly. Look how fine the weather is. Grandma will take you to the woods today to gather ashberries."

Seeing that I wasn't joking, my sister sprang out of bed, and while I helped her dress, she twittered:

"So Mummy has changed her mind? Oh, I do love it when Mummy changes her mind! I say, Boris, let's take the cat Lizka with us. Well, if you won't have the cat, then let's take Towzer. He's a jolly little doggie. He licked all my face yesterday. Only Mummy scolded me. She doesn't like your face to be licked. Towzer licked her once when she was lying in the garden and she shooed him away."

My sister jumped off the bed and ran to the door.

"Open the door for me, Boris. My headscarf is lying in the corner. My pram too."

I pulled her away from the door and seated her on the bed.

"You can't go in there, Tanya. A strange man is sleeping in there. He came last night. I'll go and get your headscarf for you."

"What man?" she asked. "Like the one last time?"

"Yes, like last time."

"With a wooden leg?"

"No, an iron one."

"Oh, Boris! I've never seen one with an iron leg. I'll just have one tiny peep through the keyhole. I'll go on tiptoes."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Sit still."

I crept softly into the room and came back with the scarf.

"And where's the pram?"

"Don't be silly! What do you want the pram for? Uncle Yegor will give you a ride there in a real cart."

The path leading to Ivanovskoye ran along the bank of the Tesha. My sister skipped along, stopping every minute, now to pick up a twig, now to look at the geese tumbling about in the water. I walked along slowly behind. The fresh morning air, the yellow-green expanse of the autumn fields, the monotonous tinkle of the brass bells of the grazing herd — all this had a soothing effect upon me.

The intrusive thought that had been tormenting me all night was now firmly established in my mind and I no longer tried to dismiss it.

I recollected the lump of clay thrown onto the window-sill. It wasn't the wind, of course. How could the wind tear up such a heavy lump of clay from the garden bed? It was my father. He had thrown it to attract attention. It was he, who, in the rain and storm, had hidden in the garden, waiting for Fedka to go away. He did not want my sister to see him, because she was little and might give the show away. Soldiers who come home on leave don't hide themselves from people.

There was no longer any room for doubt — my father was a deserter.

On my way back I ran straight into the school Inspector.

"Gorikov," he said sternly, "what's this? Why aren't you at school during lesson-time?"

"I'm ill," I answered mechanically, not realising how ridiculous the answer was.

"Ill?" the Inspector queried. "What are you talking about? Sick people don't prowl about the streets, they lie in bed."

"I'm ill," I repeated doggedly. "I have a temperature."

"Every person has a temperature," he snapped. "Don't talk nonsense. Off you go to school!"

"Now I'm in for it!" I thought, as I trudged along behind him. "What made me lie to him about being ill? Couldn't I have thought of some other

plausible excuse for my absence from school without giving the real reason?"

The old school doctor put his hand to my forehead, and without even taking my temperature, announced his diagnosis.

"Suffering from an acute attack of truancy. I prescribe poor marks for conduct and two hours after lessons without dinner."

The Inspector, with the air of a learned apothecary, approved the medicine.

He sent for the caretaker Semyon and ordered him to march me off to the classroom.

Trouble came thick and fast to me that day.

Elsa Franciskovna, our teacher of German, had been questioning Toropygin when I came in. Displeased by the interruption, she said:

"Gorikov, *kommen Sie hier*. Conjugate the verb 'to have'. '*Ich habe*'," she began.

"*Du hast*," prompted Chizhikov.

"*Er hat*," I contributed myself. "*Wir*..." Here I stumbled again. I just couldn't keep my mind on German verbs that day.

"*Hastus*," someone at the back prompted maliciously.

"*Hastus*," I repeated automatically.

"What are you talking about? Where is your head? You should use it, not listen to a silly boy's prompting. Give me your exercise-book."

"I've forgotten it, Elsa Franciskovna. I did my homework, but I forgot all my books. I'll bring them at play-time."

"How could you forget all your books?" the teacher said angrily. "You did not forget them, you are deceiving me. You will stay on an hour after lessons."

"Elsa Franciskovna," I protested, "the Inspector has already given me two hours after school today. You don't expect me to sit here all night?"

The teacher came back with a long-spun German sentence the gist of which, from what I could gather, was that laziness and lies were to be punished and there was no avoiding this third hour of detention.

During the interval Fedka came up to me.

"Why did you come without your books and why did Semyon bring you in?"

I made up some excuse. The next, last, lesson — geography — I sat out in a sort of sleepy daze. Everything the teacher said and the pupils'

answers drifted past my mind, and I only came to myself when the bell started ringing.

The monitor read the prayer. The boys banged down the tops of their desks and flew out one after another. The classroom emptied. I was left alone.

"My God!" I thought with anguish. "Three more hours ... three whole hours, and Father at home, and everything so odd..."

I went downstairs. Outside the Teachers' Room stood a long narrow bench all covered with penknife carvings. Three boys were already sitting there. One was a first form boy, who had been ordered to be kept in for an hour for having shot a pellet of chewed paper at a classmate, another was punished for fighting, and the third for having tried to land a spit on the head of a passing pupil from the second-floor staircase landing.

I sat down on the bench, brooding. The caretaker Semyon went past with a jangle of keys.

The form master on duty, who kept an eye on the culprits, came out, yawned and disappeared.

I got up quietly and glanced at the clock through the door of the Teachers' Room. What? Only half an hour had gone by? I could have sworn that I had been sitting there for an hour at least.

A sudden wicked thought came into my head.

"Damn it all, I'm not a thief, I'm not in custody. At home I have a father, whom I haven't seen for two years and now have to see in such strange and mysterious circumstances, while I have to sit here like a prisoner only because the Inspector and the German teacher took it into their heads to pick on me!"

I stood up, but hesitated. Going away without leave when you were kept in was one of the most heinous offences you could commit at school.

"No, I'd better wait," I decided, turning back to the bench.

But at this point a feeling of harsh resentment suddenly gripped me. "Who cares," I thought, "Father has run away from the front" — this with a mirthless smile — "while I'm afraid to run away from here."

I ran to the cloakroom, slipped on my coat and dashed out into the street, slamming the door hard.

That evening Father tried to open my eyes to a good many things.

"Daddy," I said, "but before you ran away from the front you were a brave man, weren't you? It wasn't because you were afraid, was it?"

"I'm not a coward now either." He said this calmly, but I involuntarily turned my head to the window and started.

From the opposite side of the street a policeman was making straight for our house. He came along slowly at a rolling gait. On reaching the middle of the road he turned right and walked towards the market-place.

"He's not ... coming here," I said jerkily, my breath quickening.

The next evening Father said to me:

"Boris, visitors may be coming down on us any day. Hide away that toy I sent you. Keep your nerve! You're a man now — look how you've grown! If you have any trouble at school because of me, don't take it to heart, and don't be afraid of anything. Watch what's going on around you and you'll understand then what I've been telling you."

"We'll be seeing you again, Dad, shan't we?"

"Yes, I'll be coming here sometimes, but not to our house."

"Where then?"

"You'll be told when the time comes."

It was already quite dark, but the bootmaker sat by the gate with his concertina and a noisy crowd of boys and girls around him.

"It's time I was going," Father said, looking worried. "I don't want to be late."

"They'll probably be there till late in the night, Daddy. It's Saturday today."

Father frowned.

"What a nuisance. Can't we get out through the fence somewhere or through someone's garden? Put your wits to work, Boris. You ought to know all the holes here."

"We can't," I said. "The Aglakovs' wall on the left is a high one with nails on it. We could get through to the garden on the right, only there's a dog there, a vicious brute, like a wolf. I tell you what. If you like I'll see you down to the pond. I have a raft there and I'll take you straight to the ravines through the back yards. It's dark now, the place is deserted, and no one will see us."

The raft became awash under Father's heavy weight and the water covered our boots. Father stood without stirring. The raft slipped noiselessly through the black water. The pole often got stuck in the mud and

silt at the bottom of the pond. I pulled it out every time with difficulty.

Twice I tried to come alongside the bank, but the bottom of the ravine was low and wet. So then I took a bit more to the right and moored at the bottom garden.

This garden was a deserted place, unguarded, and its fences were broken.

I led Father up to the first gap in the fence, through which one could get out of the ravine. There we took leave of each other.

I lingered for several minutes. The sound of snapping twigs under Father's heavy tread died away.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Three days later Mother was called out to the police station and informed that her husband had deserted from his unit. She was made to sign a statement to the effect that she had no news of his present whereabouts and if she did have she would notify the authorities about it immediately and without fail.

Through the son of the chief of the local police the school learned the next day that my father was a deserter.

At Scripture Father Gennady delivered a brief and edifying homily on loyalty to Tsar and Country and the sacredness of the Oath. He added weight to this by quoting a historical instance of how, during the Japanese war, a soldier decided to save his life by fleeing the battlefield, but met death instead from the teeth of a rapacious tiger.

This incident, according to Father Gennady, pointed to the intervention of a divine providence, which inflicted dire punishment upon the deserter, for that tiger, contrary to custom, did not devour a single piece, but simply tore that soldier limb from limb and departed.

This sermon made a powerful impression on some of the boys. During the recess Toropygin timidly assayed that the tiger probably wasn't a tiger at all, but Archangel Michael, who had taken the guise of a tiger.

Simka Gorbushkin, on the other hand, doubted whether it was Michael, since Michael had quite a different mode of procedure — he didn't use his teeth, but hacked with a sword or stabbed with a spear.

The majority agreed with this, because one of the sacred pictures on the walls of the classroom showed the angels engaged in combat

with the forces of hell. Michael on that picture had a spear, on which four devils were writhing, while three others made a bee-line for their underground retreat heels over head.

Two days later I was told that the Teachers' Council had decided to give me a bad conduct mark for running away.

This usually meant that at the next offence committed by him the pupil would be expelled from the school.

Three days after this I was given written notice that my mother was to pay my full tuition fee immediately for the first half-year. Until then I had paid only half the fee because my father was a soldier.

Hard times set in for me. I was labelled with the shameful name of "deserter's son". Many pupils I had been friendly with gave me the cold shoulder. Others, while associating with me, treated me rather oddly, as if I had had a leg amputated or someone in the family had just died. Gradually I drifted apart from everyone, stopped joining in the games, taking part in raids on other forms and visiting my schoolmates.

I spent the long autumn evenings at home or with Timka Shtukin among his birds.

I became very friendly with Timka those days. His father was kind to me. What I couldn't understand was why he sometimes looked at me intently out of the corner of his eye, then came up and patted my head, and walked away, jangling his keys, without uttering a word.

Things in town took on a strange, lively sort of turn. The population doubled. The queues outside the shops stretched away for blocks. Knots gathered everywhere, on every street corner. Religious processions carrying wonder-working icons followed one after another. All kinds of ridiculous rumours would suddenly spread. Now it was Old Believers who were said to be taking to the forest on the upstream lakes of the river Serezha. Now it was the gypsies downstream who were said to be passing counterfeit money and the reason why everything was so expensive was because there was such a lot of this false money about. And once the alarming news spread that on Friday night there was to be a beat-up of the Jews, because the war was dragging on through their espionage and treachery.

Suddenly, the town became full of tramps — God knows where they came from. All you heard was here a padlock smashed off, there a flat burgled. A Cossack squad was billeted in town. When the Cossacks,

sullen-faced, with hanging forelocks, rode down the street in serried ranks wildly yelling and whooping, Mother recoiled from the window, saying:

"I haven't seen them for a long time ... ever since nineteen 'five. They're at it again."

We had no news whatever from Father. I suspected that he was in Sormovo, near Nizhni Novgorod, but this was only a surmise based on the fact that before going away Father had questioned Mother about her brother Nikolai, who was working at a car-building plant there.

One day — it was already winter — Timka Shtukin came up to me in school and beckoned me aside. His mysterious manner excited my surprise rather than interest, and I followed him apathetically into a corner.

Timka looked round and whispered:

"Come to our place this evening. My dad said you were to come without fail."

"What does he want me for? What have you thought up this time?"

"I haven't thought up anything. Be sure to come."

Timka looked grave, even somewhat anxious, and I realised that he was not joking.

That evening I went to the cemetery. A snowstorm was blowing. The dim lamps, muffled in snow, barely lighted up the streets. To get to the wood and the cemetery I had to cross a small field. The sharp snowflakes pricked my face. I drew my head down into my collar and strode off along the snow-carpeted path towards the green lamp burning at the cemetery gates. I tripped over a gravestone and fell into the snow. The door of the caretaker's lodge was locked. Covered with snow from head to foot I knocked, but no one answered.

I knocked again and heard footsteps behind the door.

"Who is it?" the caretaker's familiar bass demanded.

"It's me, Uncle Fyodor."

"Is that you, Boris?"

"Yes. Open the door, quick."

I entered the warmly heated lodge. On the table stood a samovar, a saucer with honey and a loaf of bread. Timka sat mending a cage as if nothing had happened.

"A snowstorm?" he said, seeing my red wet face.

"You said it!" I answered. "I hurt my foot. It's pitch dark."

Timka laughed. I couldn't make out what he was laughing about and I looked at him in surprise. Timka laughed still louder, and I could tell by his glance that he was not laughing at me but at something behind my back. Turning round, I saw Uncle Fyodor and my father.

"He's been with us two days," Timka said, when we had sat down to have tea.

"Two days... And you didn't tell me before! Call yourself a pal after this?"

Timka, with a guilty air, glanced first at his father, then at mine, as if seeking their support.

"A stone," the caretaker said, patting his son on the back with his heavy hand. "He may not be much to look at, but he's a reliable little chap."

Father was in civvies. He was cheerful and animated. He asked me about my school affairs and kept laughing every minute, saying:

"Never mind ... never mind. Don't worry. Look what days are coming — don't you feel it?"

I said I felt that at the first admonition I received at school I would be kicked out.

"You should worry!" he answered coolly. "Given the desire and a good head you won't remain a fool, school or no school."

"Daddy," I said to him, "why are you so jolly, laughing all the time? Our clergyman read a sermon about you and everyone thinks of you as of the dead, and here you are as jolly as can be."

Ever since I had become Father's involuntary accomplice I spoke to him differently — as to a senior, but an equal. I could see that Father liked it.

"I'm jolly because exciting times are on the way. We've had enough tears! Ah, well. Run along now. We'll be seeing each other again soon."

It was late. I said goodbye, put on my coat and ran out onto the porch. Before the caretaker had time to come down and bolt the door after me, I felt myself flung aside with such force that I went flying head foremost into a snowdrift. In the same instant there was a stamping of feet, whistles and shouts in the entry. I ran back and saw the policeman Yevgraf, whose son Pashka had attended the parish school with me.

"Hold on," he said, recognising me and detaining me by the arm.

"They'll manage there without you. Here, take the end of my hood and wipe your face. You didn't hurt your head, God forbid, did you?"

"No, I didn't hurt myself," I whispered. "What about Dad?"

"What about him? No one told him to go against the law. You can't go against the law, old chap."

Father and the caretaker were led out of the lodge with their hands tied behind them. Timka trailed after them with his coat thrown over his shoulders, but without a cap. He did not cry, but merely shivered in a strange way.

"Timka," the caretaker said gravely, "you will spend the night with your godfather. Tell him to look after the house in case anything gets lost after the search."

Father walked out in silence, his head bent. Seeing me, he straightened up and shouted encouragingly:

"Never mind, son. Goodbye. Kiss Mother and Tanya for me. And don't worry. Exciting times are on the way, old chap!"

II. Exciting Times

CHAPTER ONE

On February 22nd, 1917, the court martial of the Sixth Army Corps sentenced Private Alexei Gorikov of the Twelfth Siberian Rifle Regiment to be shot for deserting the theatre of military operations and for subversive propaganda.

The sentence was executed on February 25th, and on March 2nd a telegram arrived from Petrograd saying that the autocracy had been overthrown by the insurgent people.

My first clear glimpse of the revolution was the fiery glow of the Polutins' burning manor house. Till late at night, through the dormer window, I watched the tongues of flame sporting with the fresh spring breeze. I softly stroked the smooth warm grip of the pistol in my pocket. It was now my dearest token of remembrance from my father. I smiled through my tears, which had not dried yet after my grievous loss, as I thought of the "exciting times" that were coming.

During the early days of the February revolution our school resembled an ant heap into which a smouldering brand had been thrown. After prayers supplicating victory, some of the pupils started, as always, to sing "God Save the Tsar", but the others shouted them down, whistling and whooping. Pandemonium reigned, the pupils broke ranks, someone threw a bun at the portrait of the Tsarina, while the first formers, glad of a chance to kick up a dust with impunity, began caterwauling and bleating.

The bewildered Inspector could not make himself heard above the hideous noise. The yells and catcalls did not cease until Semyon, the caretaker, took down the portraits of royalty. With wild screeches and a stamping of feet the excited boys ran off to their classrooms. Red bows

appeared from somewhere. The boys of the senior forms demonstratively tucked their trousers into their high boots (formerly this was forbidden) and gathering outside the lavatory started smoking deliberately under the eyes of the form masters. Officer Balagushin, the drill teacher, went up to them. He was offered a cigarette, which he accepted. At this unprecedented spectacle of unity between the school authorities and the pupils a loud cheer went up.

At this stage, all that the pupils gathered from these happenings was that the Tsar had been deposed and the revolution was beginning. As to why the revolution was something to be rejoiced at and what good there was in the overthrow of the Tsar, before whose portrait the choir, only a few days ago, had fervently sung the national anthem — this, most of the boys, especially those of the junior forms, failed to understand.

For the first few days there were practically no lessons. The boys of the senior forms joined the militia. They were given rifles and red armbands, and proudly paraded the streets, maintaining public order. For that matter, no one thought of disturbing public order. The bells of all thirty churches pealed forth a paschal song. Clergymen in glittering robes administered the oath of allegiance to the Provisional Government.

People appeared in red shirts. The son of priest Iona, seminarist Arkhangelsky, two rural teachers and three others, who were strangers to me, called themselves S.R.s.* People also appeared in black shirts, mostly senior form students of the Teachers' and Theological seminaries, who called themselves anarchists.

Most people in the town immediately joined the S.R.s. Credit for this was in no little measure due to the Rev. Pavel, who, during his sermon at the cathedral after the prayer for the prolongation of the days of the Provisional Government, declared that Jesus Christ, too, was a socialist and a revolutionary. And as the inhabitants of our town were pious people, mostly merchants, artisans, monks and pilgrims, this interesting sidelight on Jesus Christ aroused their quick sympathy towards the S.R.s, especially since the S.R.s did not have much to say about religion and spoke mostly about liberty and the need for carrying on the

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* Socialist-Revolutionaries — a major political party representing the interests of petty bourgeoisie. Existed from 1901 to 1923. In December 1917, an independent party of Left S.R.s split off from it.— *Ed.*

war with redoubled energy. The anarchists, though they said the same things about the war, spoke ill of God. Seminarist Velikanov, for instance, bluntly declared from the speaker's platform that there was no God, and if there was a God, then let him accept his, Velikanov's, challenge and show his might. At these words Velikanov threw back his head and spat straight into the sky. The crowd gasped, expecting the heavens to cleave asunder at any moment and fling thunderbolts upon the head of the blasphemer. But as the heavens did not cleave asunder, voices were raised in the crowd suggesting public chastisement by a kick in the anarchist pants without waiting for divine retribution. Hearing such talk, Velikanov judiciously beat a hasty retreat, receiving only a feeble punch from Maremiana Sergeyevna, a spiteful old woman, who sold curative oil from the lamps of the Sarovo icon of the Mother of God and dried crusts with which that Holy Man Serafim of Sarovo fed the wild bears and wolves out of his own hand.

On the whole, I was astonished at the number of revolutionaries that were to be found in Arzamas. Absolutely everybody was a revolutionary. Even Zakharov, the former Rural Superintendent, pinned a huge red bow made of silk to his jacket. In Petrograd and Moscow there was fighting, and the police shot at the people from the roofs, but our police gave up their arms voluntarily, and changing into civilian clothes, peacefully walked about the streets.

One day, in the crowd at a meeting, I met Yevgraf Timofeyevich, the policeman who had taken part in the arrest of my father.

He carried a basket from which peeped a bottle of vegetable oil and a cabbage. He was standing listening to what the socialists were saying. Seeing me, he touched his cap and gave me a polite bow.

"How's life?" he said. "You've come to listen, too? Well, well, listen... You young people must find it interesting. Even we oldsters do. See how things have turned out!"

"Do you remember how you came to arrest Father, Yevgraf Timofeyevich?" I said. "You spoke then about the law, one couldn't go against the law, you said. But where's that law of yours now? Your law is finished with, and all you policemen will stand trial too."

He laughed good-humouredly and the oil shook in the neck of the bottle.

"There was law before and there'll be law now. You can't be without a law, young man. As for trying us, well — let 'em. We won't be hanged.

Not even our chiefs are being hanged. The Tsar himself is only under house arrest, so what can you expect of us! Just listen. The speaker says there should be no vengeance, men should be brothers, and now, in free Russia, there should be no prisons, no executions. That means there'll be no prisons or executions for us either."

And he ambled off.

I watched him going, thinking: "How can that be? Do you mean to say that if Father had got out of jail he'd allow his jailer to walk about calmly and wouldn't touch him only because all men had to be brothers?"

I asked Fedka about it.

"What's your father got to do with it?" he said. "Your father was a deserter and there was a stain on him all the same. Deserters are being hunted down now too. A deserter is not a revolutionary, he's just a quitter who doesn't want to fight for his country."

"My father wasn't a coward," I answered, paling. "You're talking through your hat. My father was shot for propaganda as well as for running away. We've got a copy of the sentence at home."

Fedka looked put out. He said in a conciliatory tone:

"I didn't make it up myself, did I? All the newspapers are writing about it.

"You read Kerensky's speech in *Russkoye Slovo*. A fine speech. When it was read out at the general meeting in the Girls' School it had half the hall crying. It speaks about the war, too. About how we must exert all our strength, about deserters being a disgrace to the army and that 'over the graves of those who have fallen in the fight against the Germans free Russia will erect a monument of imperishable glory'. That's what it says —'imperishable'! And you argue!"

Speakers took the platform one after another. They spoke about socialism in voices that had gone hoarse. There and then they wrote down people who wanted to join the party and volunteered for the front. There were speakers who got on to the platform and spoke until they were finally dragged off. New speakers were pushed forward in their place.

I listened and listened and felt my head swelling with all that I heard, like an empty ox bladder. The speeches of the different orators got all mixed up in my head. I just couldn't make out how to distinguish an S.R.

from a Cadet*, a Cadet from a Popular Socialist** and a Trudovik*** from an anarchist, and all that remained of all the speeches was the one word: "Liberty ... liberty ... liberty ..."

"Gorikov," I heard a voice behind me and felt a hand upon my shoulder.

Next to me, who should I see but our teacher of handicraft Jackdaw.

"You?" I said, overjoyed. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come from Nizhni Novgorod, from prison. Come down to my place, my dear boy. I've taken a room not far from here. We'll have some tea, I've got a white loaf and honey. I'm so glad that I've met you. I arrived only yesterday and was going specially to call on you today."

He took my arm and we made our way through the noisy crowd.

At the adjoining square we ran into another crowd. Bonfires were burning here and knots of curious bystanders stood around them.

"What is this?"

"Oh, tomfoolery," Jackdaw said, smiling. "The anarchists are burning the tsarist flags. They'd do better to tear up the cloth and give it away. The peasants are grumbling. You know how precious every bit of rag is nowadays."

Jackdaw's arms were long and skinny. He spoke rapidly as he brewed the tea, every now and then smiling.

"Your father died too early. We were both in the same cell until he was sent to the Corps Tribunal."

"Semyon Ivanovich," I said over the tea, "you say that you and Dad were Party comrades. Was he in the Party? He never spoke to me about it."

"He didn't speak about it because he couldn't."

"You didn't speak about it either. When you were arrested, Petka Zolotukhin said you were a spy."

Jackdaw laughed.

"A spy! Ha-ha-ha! Petka Zolotukhin? Ha-ha! It's pardonable in the

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* Cadets — Constitutional Democrats, a party of the liberal-monarchist trend in 1905-1917. After the socialist revolution the party took a counter-revolutionary stand and was banned by the Soviet Government.— *Ed.*

** Popular Socialists — a party that split off from the right-wing S.R.s in 1906.— *Ed.*

*** Trudoviks — a faction in the First State Duma (Parliament) representing peasants and intellectuals of populist convictions and later growing into a political organisation.— *Ed.*

case of Zolotukhin, he's a silly boy, but when big fools now are spreading rumours about our being spies — that's still funnier, my dear chap."

"About who are they spreading rumours, Semyon Ivanovich?"

"About us Bolsheviks."*

I glanced askance at him.

"Are you Bolsheviks then — I mean, so Father, too, was a Bolshevik?"

"He was."

"Why did everything go wrong with Father, not like with other men?" I said regretfully, after a moment's thought.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, other men are soldiers as soldiers go. If they're revolutionaries they are real revolutionaries, and nobody can have a bad word to say of them. Everybody respects them. But Father — at one moment he's a deserter, the next he turns out to have been a Bolshevik. Why a Bolshevik, and not a real revolutionary, like the S.R.s, say, or the anarchists? As if on purpose, he had to go and be a Bolshevik! At least I could then have told everyone that my father was shot for being a revolutionary, and everyone would shut up and nobody would point a finger at me. But if I said Father had been shot because he was a Bolshevik everyone would say 'serves him right', because it's written in all the newspapers that the Bolsheviks are German agents and that Lenin of theirs is working for Wilhelm."

"Who's the 'everyone'?" Jackdaw said. Throughout my vehement speech he had been looking at me with smiling eyes.

"Yes, everyone. Anyone you meet. All the neighbours, and the clergyman in his sermon, and these speakers here..."

"Neighbours! Speakers!" Jackdaw broke in. "Silly boy. Why, your father was ten times a more real revolutionary than all these speakers and neighbours of yours. Who are your neighbours? They are monks, corn-dealers, merchants, pilgrims, market butchers and all kinds of petty folk. The trouble is there is hardly a right-minded person among all these neighbours of yours. We don't even try to win over this mob. We leave

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* Bolsheviks — members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: the name dates back to 1903, when, at the 2nd Congress of the Party, Lenin's supporters constituted the majority in elections of the party's leading bodies (*bolshinstvo*), and the opposition, the minority (*menshinstvo*). Hence Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.— *Ed.*

it to those red-shirted gas-bags to suck up to them. We can't waste time with them. All the same, these monks and merchants will never be our allies. You wait, I'll take you to places where we hold meetings. Places like barracks for the wounded, soldiers' barracks, the railway station and the villages. That's where you will hear things! Talk about judges here! Neighbours!"

Jackdaw laughed.

Timka Shtukin's father was released at the beginning of the revolution, but he was not reinstated in his old job. The church warden Sinyugin ordered him to vacate the lodge immediately for the newly employed man.

None of the merchants wanted to employ the caretaker. He tried here and there, but there were no jobs going either as furnace-man or yard-keeper.

Sinyugin, he said bluntly:

"I'm helping the Russian army. I've made a donation of a thousand rubles to the Red Cross and distributed over two hundred rubles' worth of gifts, flags and portraits of Kerensky among the military hospitals, while you are encouraging deserters. I have no job for you."

This was more than the caretaker could stand, and he answered back:

"I am much obliged to you for those words. But allow me to tell you that flags and portraits won't help you. You'll get what's coming to you all right. And don't you yell at me!" Uncle Fyodor suddenly went up into the air. "You think because you've grown a fat belly, put in a telescope and feed that crocodile o' yours with beef, that you're mightier than tsar or God? Don't you believe it. You just listen what the people are saying at those mills of yours. We've taken a smack at 'em, they say, now what about giving 'em a bit more!"

"I'll... I'll have you jailed!" Sinyugin stammered, thunderstruck. "So that's what it is! I'll write a complaint... My factory's working for the army. The new authorities, too, think well of me, and you... Get out of here!"

The caretaker put his cap on and went out.

"And they call this a revolution. All the dirty scum are still in their old places. And he dares to tell me off, when he and the military chief and the town council nobs are as thick as thieves. What they want is a good

scraping down with nails. Patriot!" he growled as he strode down the streets. "Made thousands out o' rotten boots. Bought his son off from military service. Slipped the chief three hundred and the hospital doctor five hundred. Boasted of it himself when he was tipsy. You're all good at fighting the war with other men's hands. Bought portraits of Kerensky. You and that Kerensky of yours ought to be strung up on the same tree. This is the liberty we've been waiting for! Three cheers!"

Everybody seemed to have gone crazy. All you heard was: "Kerensky, Kerensky." Every issue of the newspapers carried his portraits: "Kerensky makes a speech", "The populace strews Kerensky's path with flowers", "A delighted crowd of women carry Kerensky in their arms". Feofanov, a member of the Arzamas Town Council, went to Moscow on business and shook Kerensky's hand. People ran after Feofanov in droves.

"Do you mean to say he shook hands with you?"

"Yes, he did," Feofanov answered proudly.

"Actually shook you by the hand?"

"Yes, he shook my right hand."

"There!" came an excited whispering among the crowd. "The Tsar would never have done it, but Kerensky did. Thousands of people come to see him every day and he shakes hands with all of them, but before —"

"Before, there was tsarism."

"Sure. Now we have liberty."

"Hurray! Hurray! Long live liberty! Long live Kerensky! Let's send him a telegram of greeting."

It should be said that by this time one telegram out of ten passing through the post office was a telegram of greeting addressed to Kerensky. They were sent from public meetings, from school gatherings, from meetings of the Church Council, the Town Council, the Gonfaloniers' Society — from absolutely everywhere, even if it were only a group of several people.

One day the rumour spread that the Arzamas Society of Poultry-Breeding Lovers had not sent a single telegram to the "dear leader". The local daily printed an indignant denial by the Society's president Ofendulin. Ofendulin flatly declared that the rumour was a vicious slander. Actually two telegrams had been sent, the editors certifying in a special footnote that Mr. Ofendulin's statement was supported by evidence in the shape of appropriate receipts bearing the stamp of the post and telegraph office.

CHAPTER TWO

Several months had passed since I met Jackdaw.

In Salnikov Street, next door to the huge building of the Seminary, there stood a little house with a garden. The man in the street, on passing by its open windows, through which faces could be seen floating in a haze of strong tobacco smoke, would quicken his step and spit angrily when out of hearing: "This is where the provocateurs meet!"

This was the Bolsheviks' club. There were altogether some twenty Bolsheviks in the town, but the house was always crowded. It was open to everybody, but it was frequented mainly by soldiers from the hospital, Austrian prisoners of war and workers from the tanneries and felt factories.

I spent practically all my free time there. At first I had gone there with Jackdaw out of curiosity, then through habit, and after that I was drawn into the maelstrom, swept off my feet. Like the peelings of a potato under a sharp knife, all the rubbish with which my head had been stuffed fell away from me.

Our Bolsheviks did not speak at church disputes or at meetings among the tradespeople. They held meetings outside the workers' bunk-houses, outside the town and in the war-wearied villages.

I remember a meeting once held at Kamenka.

"We must go for sure! There'll be a real fight. Kruglikov himself is going to speak there for the S.R.s. You should hear him sing." Jackdaw said. "After a speech of his at Ivanovskoye the peasants were so bamboozled they all but went for us."

"Let's go," I said eagerly. "Why is it you never take your revolver with you, Semyon Ivanovich? It's always lying about just anywhere. Once you stuck it in the tobacco tin, and yesterday I saw it in the bread basket. I always carry mine about with me. I even put it under my pillow when I go to bed."

Jackdaw laughed, and his beard with crumbs of tobacco on it shook.

"What a kid you still are!" he said. "Now, if things turn out badly for us, I'd simply catch it in the neck, but if I tried to draw my revolver they'd probably make potted meat of me. We'll use revolvers when the time comes, but just now our best weapon is the word. Baskakov is going to speak today for our people."

"Baskakov?" I said, surprised. "But he's such a bad speaker. He can

hardly put his sentences together. Between one word and the next you can fall asleep."

"That's how he is here, but you should hear him at meetings."

The road to Kamenka ran across an old rotting bridge, past uncut flood meadows and small channels overgrown with tall dense reeds. Peasant carts coming from town stretched along the road. Barefooted peasant women with empty milk cans trudged home from the market. We were in no hurry, but when a droshky packed with S.R.s overtook us, we quickened our steps.

Groups of peasants from the neighbouring villages flocked to the square from all sides along the wide streets.

The meeting had not yet begun, but the noise and hubbub could be heard at a distance.

I saw Fedka among the crowd. He snooped backwards and forwards, thrusting leaflets into the hands of passers-by. Seeing me, he ran up.

"Oho! So you've come too. Gee, it's going to be exciting today! Here, take a batch and help me hand them out."

He gave me a batch of some dozen leaflets. I unfolded one of them. They were S. R. leaflets in favour of war to a victorious end and against desertion. I gave them back to him.

"No, Fedka, I'm not going to hand out these leaflets. Do it yourself if you want."

Fedka spat in disgust.

"You're a fool. You're not with them, are you?" he said, jerking his head in the direction of Jackdaw and Baskakov. "You're a nice one, I must say. And I relied on you!"

With a contemptuous shrug, Fedka disappeared among the crowd.

"He relied on me," I said to myself with an ironical smile. "As if I haven't got a head of my own!"

"To a victorious end..." I heard a quiet voice next to me.

Turning round, I saw a bareheaded peasant with a pock-marked face. He was barefooted, too, and in one hand he held a leaflet, and it the other a torn bridle. He must have been engaged mending it and had come out of his hut to hear what people were saying.

"To a victorious end — I like that!" he repeated, eyeing the crowd with a puzzled wondering look. He shook his head, sat down on the doorstep,

and poking a finger at the leaflet shouted into the ear of the deaf old man sitting next to him:

"Again to a victorious end. We've been hearing that since nineteen fourteen. How d'you make that out, Grandpa Prokhor?"

A cart was rolled out into the middle of the square. A chairman, whom no one had elected — a perky little fellow — got up on the cart and shouted:

"Citizens! I declare the meeting open. I give the floor to Comrade Kruglikov, the Socialist-Revolutionary, who will report on the Provisional Government, on the war and the present situation."

The chairman jumped off the cart. For a minute or so there was no one on the "platform". Then all of a sudden Kruglikov sprang up on it, stood up to his full height and raised his hand. The hubbub was silenced.

"Citizens of great free Russia! On behalf of the Party of Socialist-Revolutionaries I convey ardent greetings to you."

Kruglikov started speaking. I listened to him, careful not to miss a word.

He spoke about the difficult conditions the Provisional Government was obliged to work in. The Germans were pressing on the front, dark forces — German spies and the Bolsheviks — were agitating in favour of Wilhelm.

"We had Tsar Nicholas, now there'll be Wilhelm. Do you want a tsar again?" he asked.

"No, we've had enough!" hundreds of voices answered from the crowd.

"We're tired of the war," Kruglikov went on. "Aren't we fed up with it? Isn't it time to finish with it?"

"Hear, hear!" the crowd responded with still greater unanimity.

"What's the idea, speaking off somebody else's programme," I whispered indignantly to Jackdaw. "They don't stand for ending the war, do they?"

Jackdaw nudged me in the ribs. "Shut up and listen."

"It's high time! There, you see," the S.R. continued, "you all say that to a man. But the Bolsheviks don't give the war-weary country a chance to get the war over with victory. They are demoralising the army, and the army is unfit for action. If we had a fighting-fit army we would deal the enemy a decisive winning blow and conclude peace. But we can't conclude peace now. Whose fault is that? Whose fault is it that our sons, brothers, husbands and fathers are rotting in the trenches instead of com-

ing home to peaceful work? Who is putting off victory and dragging out the war? We, Socialist-Revolutionaries, solemnly declare: Long live the last decisive blow at the enemy, long live the victory of the revolutionary army over the German hordes, and after that — down with war and long live peace!"

The crowd breathed hard amid clouds of tobacco smoke. Shouts of approval were heard here and there.

Kruglikov began speaking about the Constituent Assembly, which was to be the master of the land, about the arbitrary seizure of the landed estates, and about the need for preserving order and carrying out the instructions and commands of the Provisional Government. He spun a fine web around the minds of his listeners. At first he stood up for the peasants, whom he reminded of their needs. When the crowd started to shout its approval — "Hear, hear!" "You're right!" "It couldn't be worse!" — Kruglikov, by imperceptible degrees, began to reverse. It suddenly turned out that the crowd, which had just agreed with him that without the land there was no freedom for the peasants, was led to the conclusion that in a free country the land could not be taken away from the landowners by seizure.

He ended his ninety-minute speech amid a loud hum of applause and curses hurled at the heads of the spies and the Bolsheviks.

"Baskakov is no match for Kruglikov," I thought. "Look how worked up they all are!"

To my surprise, Baskakov, who was standing next to me, puffing at his pipe, did not reveal the slightest intention of getting up on the platform.

The S.R.s huddled round the cart were somewhat puzzled, too, at the behaviour of the Bolsheviks. They decided that the Bolsheviks were waiting for somebody else to arrive, and so they let out another speaker. This one was much weaker than Kruglikov. He stammered in a low voice and repeated much of what had already been said. When he got down there was considerably less clapping.

Baskakov still stood smoking. His long narrow eyes were pursed and his face wore a good-humoured artless expression as much as to say: "Let 'em jabber. Who cares? I'm smoking my pipe, and not interfering with anybody."

The third speaker was no better than the second one, and when he got down most of the audience started whistling, whooping and shouting:

"Hi, Mr. Chairman there!"

"Let's have other speakers, you chump!"

"Let's have those Bolsheviks! Why don't you give 'em the floor?"

Countering this charge, the chairman protested that he was giving the floor to anybody who wanted it, but the Bolsheviks didn't ask for it themselves, because they were probably afraid. He couldn't force them to speak.

"If you can't, then we can!"

"Gone and done the dirty thing and now they're trying to hide!"

"Drag 'em to the cart by the scruff of the neck! Let 'em speak out in front o' people..."

The roar of the crowd frightened me. I glanced at Jackdaw. He was smiling, but pale.

"That'll do, Baskakov," he said. "It may end badly."

Baskakov cleared his throat with a loud noise, thrust his pipe away into his pocket and shambled towards the cart past the angry crowd, who made way for him.

He took his time. First he glanced incuriously at the knot of S.R.s around the cart, then wiped his forehead with the flat of his hand, ran his eye over the crowd, folded his huge fist into a fig, held it up for everyone to see, and said in a cool, loud, mocking voice:

"Seen that?"

Such an extraordinary opening startled me. It took the peasants, too, by surprise.

It immediately evoked angry cries:

"What's this?"

"What's the idea, showing people a fig?"

"Answer in words, damn you, not figs, if you don't want to get it in the neck!"

"Seen that?" Baskakov began again. "If you haven't, they'll show you one better," he jerked his head in the direction of the S.R.s. "Enough to make a cat sick, the way you citizens of free Russia swallow everything you're told. Now tell me this, citizens — what good has the revolution done you? You had a war, and you've still got it. You had no land, and you still haven't got it. The landowner lived next door and he's still there, alive and kicking. He should worry. You can whoop and hoot till you're blue in the face. This government, too, will stand up for the landowner. You ask the Vodovatovo villagers — what happened when they tried to get at the squire's land? They found a military detachment there. It was

fine land all right, but there was nothing doing. You've stood it for three hundred years, you say? Go on, put up with it still longer. God loves patient souls, they say. Wait for the landowner to come and doff his cap, saying: 'Would you like some good land? Take it, please, do me a favour.' You can wait till doomsday. Have you heard that the Constituent Assembly, when it meets, is going to discuss the question — 'Should the land be given to the peasantry with or without redemption payments?' Now then, count your money when you get home and see if you have enough to buy off the land. That's why there was a revolution, according to you — so that you could buy your own land off from the landowners? What the blazes, I ask you, did we need such a revolution for? Couldn't you have bought off the land for your own money without having a revolution?"

"What's that about redemption payments?" angered and worried voices were raised in the crowd.

"Just this..." Baskakov said, producing a crumpled leaflet from his pocket and reading out from it: "'Justice demands that the landowners receive compensation for the land which is handed over from them to the peasants.' That's redemption payment for you. That's what the Cadet Party writes, and they're going to sit in the Constituent Assembly too. They, too, are going to fight for their own interests. But we, Bolsheviks, say bluntly: It's no good waiting for the Constituent Assembly, give us the land right away, without any discussions, without stalling, and without redemption payments! We've paid enough."

"Paid enough!" hundreds of voices echoed in the crowd.

"Discussions be damned! Like as not, we'll get nothing again."

"Shut up, can't you! Let the Bolshevik speak! Maybe he'll say something hot again."

I stood open-mouthed next to Jackdaw. A sudden wave of joy and pride for Baskakov swept over me.

"Semyon Ivanovich!" I cried, pulling Jackdaw's sleeve. "And I thought that of him. Why, it's not even a speech he's making, he's simply talking to them."

"My, what a fine chap, what a clever chap Baskakov is!" I thought as I listened to his calm heavy words dropping into the excited crowd.

"Peace after victory?" Baskakov was saying. "Not a bad idea. We'll conquer Constantinople. We're desperately in need of Constantinople,

we are! We'll conquer Berlin, too, while we're at it. I ask you," — Baskakov jabbed a finger at the peasant with the bridle, who had pushed his way forward — "I ask you: Has the German or the Turk borrowed money from you which he doesn't want to give back? Come on, my dear man, tell me what business you've got in Constantinople. Are you going to cart potatoes to the market there? Why don't you speak?"

The peasant reddened and blinked, then spread his hands and answered in an irate tone:

"I don't need it at all... What do I want it for?"

"You don't want it, nor do I, nor does anyone else here. The merchants want it so's to carry on a profitable trade. If they want it let 'em fight for it. What's the peasant got to do with it? Why have they driven half your village off to the front? To help the merchants rake in the profits! What boobs you are! Big fellows with beards, yet anyone can twist you round his little finger."

"You've said it!" the peasant cried, smacking his leg. "Daze my eyes, the man's right!" He heaved a deep sigh and lowered his head.

"Well then, we tell you," Baskakov said, winding up, "we don't want peace after victory, until the cows come home, and more thousands of workers and peasants will have been maimed — we want peace now, without any victories. We haven't won a victory yet over the landowner on our own land. Am I right, brothers, or not? If anybody doesn't agree, let him come out here and say I'm a liar, say I wasn't telling you the truth. I've got nothing more to say!"

I remember, a moaning roar broke from the crowd. The S.R. Kruglikov, with a white face, jumped up, waving his arms in an attempt to make himself heard. He was pushed off the cart. Baskakov lighted his pipe, and the peasant with the pock-marked face, the one Baskakov had asked what he wanted Constantinople for, tugged at his sleeve, inviting him into his hut to have tea.

"With honey!" he said in a voice that was almost pleading. "We've still got a little left. Let your friends come, too." We drank boiling water brewed with dried raspberries. There was a pleasant smell of honeycomb in the hut. The droshky loaded with S.R.s rolled past the window down the dusty road. Dry stuffy evening set in. Far away in town the bells were droning. The monks and clergy of the thirty churches were offering up prayers for the appeasement of the rebellious land.

CHAPTER THREE

I went to the cemetery to say goodbye to Timka Shtukin. He and his father were going to his uncle in the Ukraine. His uncle had a small farm somewhere near Zhitomir.

Their things were packed. Timka's father had gone to get a cart. Timka seemed cheerful. He couldn't sit still, and kept running from one corner to another as if to take a last look at the walls of the lodge in which he had grown up. But I had a suspicion that Timka wasn't really cheerful and was trying hard to fight back the tears. He had set free all his birds.

"They've all ... flown away," Timka said. "The robin, and the tomtits, and the goldfinches and the siskin. You know, Boris, I loved the siskin most of all. He was quite tame. I opened the cage door, but he wouldn't fly out. I pushed him out with a little stick. He flew onto a poplar branch and started singing — you should have heard him! I sat under the tree and hung the cage on a twig. I sat there, thinking how we'd been living and about the birds and the cemetery, and the school, and how it was all over and we had to go away. I sat a long time, thinking, then I got up and reached for the cage. And would you believe it — there sat my siskin. He got back into it, didn't want to fly away. All of a sudden I felt so sorry for everything, I nearly... I nearly cried, Boris."

"You're fibbing, Timka," I said, deeply moved. "You probably did cry."

"So I did," Timka confessed with a catch in his voice. "I've got so used to it all, Boris. I feel so sorry we've been kicked out of here. D'you know, I even went to the church warden Sinyugin without Father knowing to ask him to let us stay. But he wouldn't." Timka sighed and turned away. "What does he care? He's got such a fine house of his own..."

Timka's voice dropped to a whisper at the last words and he quickly went out into the next room. When I joined him there a minute later I found him crying, his face pressed into a big bundle with bedding.

At the railway station Timka and his father disappeared, swept along by the human mass that made a rush for the cars as the train steamed in.

"He'll be crushed," I thought worriedly. "Where can this mass of people be going to?"

The platform was crowded to overflowing. Soldiers, officers, sailors. "At least these are used to it and they're in service, but where are those

people going?" I wondered, glancing at the groups gathered around heaps of boxes, baskets and suitcases. Civilians were travelling in whole families. Clean-shaven irate men with perspiring foreheads caused by running about and agitation. Fine-featured women with tired harassed eyes. Old-fashioned maters in fantastic hats, stunned by the hurly-burly, obstinate and irritated.

On my left, on a huge suitcase, sat an old lady, looking like one of those old noble countesses they showed you at the cinema. With one hand she held a strapped bundle of bedclothes, in the other a cage with a parrot.

She was shouting something to a young naval officer, who was trying to shift a heavy iron-bound trunk on the platform.

"Stop it," he answered. "What porter can you get here! Oh, damn it! I say!" he called out, dropping the trunk and turning to a passing soldier. "Hi, you! Help me to get these things into the car, will you."

Taken by surprise and mechanically obeying the peremptory command, the soldier stopped with his arms down his sides, then as if ashamed of his hasty compliance under the mocking glances of his mates, he relaxed, slowly hooked his hand under his belt and looked at the officer with a cunning narrowed eye.

"I'm speaking to you," the officer repeated. "Have you gone deaf, or what?"

"No, sir, I haven't gone deaf, but it's no business of mine to drag your wardrobes for you."

The soldier turned away and sauntered off down the length of the train.

"Grégoire!" the old lady cried, goggling at the officer with faded eyes. "Find a gendarme, Grégoire, let him arrest that rude man!"

But the officer waved his hand at her with a hopeless gesture, and suddenly flying into a temper, answered sharply:

"I wish you wouldn't poke your nose in! What do you understand? What gendarme are you talking about — one from the next world? Sit still and keep your mouth shut."

Timka unexpectedly poked his head out of the window.

"Hi! Boris! We're here!"

"How are you fixed up?"

"Not bad. Father is sitting on our baggage, and a sailor has given

me a place next to him on the top ledge. 'Only don't fidget,' he says, 'or I'll drive you off.'"

At the sound of the second bell the hubbub rose to uproar. Full-flavoured oaths mixed with French speech, the smell of perfume with that of sweat, the sounds of an accordion with someone's weeping, all of which was suddenly drowned in the screech of the locomotive.

"Goodbye, Timka!"

"Goodbye, Boris!" he answered leaning out of the window and waving his hand.

The train disappeared, carrying away with it a varied assortment of hundreds of people, but the station was as crowded as ever.

"Whew, look at 'em!" I heard a voice beside me. "All making tracks south. For Rostov, the Don. All the trains going north are carrying only soldiers, servicemen, but those going south are packed with the gentry."

"Where are they all going — to the health resorts?"

"You said it," came a mocking voice. "To take a cure from the heeby-jeebies. They're sick with fear these days, the gentry."

I walked towards the exit past boxes, trunks and sacks, past people drinking tea, cracking sunflower seeds, sleeping, laughing and quarrelling.

Semyon, the lame newsman, popped up from somewhere and hobbled down the platform on his wooden leg with surprising agility, shouting in a shrill raucous voice:

"Late edition! *Russkoye Slovo*! Staggering details of Bolshevik demonstration! Government breaks up demonstration! People killed and wounded. Vain hunt for the chief Bolshevik — Lenin!"

The papers were snatched out of his hands, no one demanding change.

On my way back I turned slightly right off the road and walked down a narrow path running through a field of ripe rye. As I descended the ravine I saw a man coming towards me on the opposite slope, bent beneath the weight of a heavy package. I had no difficulty in recognising Jackdaw.

"Boris," he called out, "what are you doing here? Coming from the railway station?"

"Yes. And where are you going? Not to catch the train, surely? If so, then you're late, Semyon Ivanovich. The train has just gone."

Jackdaw stopped, dumped his heavy burden on the ground and sat down in the grass.

"Tut, tut," he said with annoyance. "What am I going to do with this now?" He prodded the tied-up bundle with his foot.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Mostly literature. And something else besides..."

"Then let me help you carry it back. You can leave it at the club and go tomorrow."

Jackdaw shook his black beard, which, as usual, was strewn with crumbs of tobacco.

"That's just the trouble, old chap, I can't leave it at the club. Our club's gone phut. The club's no more."

"What d'you mean?" I said, almost jumping. "Has it burned down, or what? I passed it only this morning on my way here."

"It hasn't burned down, it's been closed down, old chap. Luckily, some of our people managed to warn us in good time. They're searching the place now."

"But Semyon Ivanovich," I said in perplexity, "how can anyone close down the club? This is not the old regime. We've got freedom now. The S.R.s have their club, so have the Mensheviks, and the Cadets, and the anarchists are always drunk, what's more, they've boarded up their windows from outside, and nobody touches them. We behaved quietly, and all of a sudden they close us down."

"Freedom!" Jackdaw smiled. "Freedom for some, a duck's egg for others. But what am I to do with this package? I must hide it somewhere till tomorrow. I can't very well drag it back to town — they may take it away."

"Then let's hide it, Semyon Ivanovich! I know a place near here. A little way down the ravine there's a pond, with an opening at the side where they used to dig clay for brickmaking. There are lots of holes there in the walls. You could hide a horse and cart there, let alone a package. Only there are snakes there, they say, and I'm barefooted. But you've got boots on, so it's all right. Even if you do get bitten it doesn't matter — you won't die, you just get sort of dopey."

Jackdaw did not like this tailpiece, and he asked me whether there wasn't some other hiding place nearby without any snakes in it.

I said there was no other suitable place nearby. There were always people about — either grazing the herd, or weeding the potatoes, or else it was boys hanging around peoples' vegetable gardens.

So then Jackdaw shouldered the package and we walked along the bank of the stream.

We hid the package in a safe place.

"Now run off to town," Jackdaw said. "I'll come for it myself tomorrow. If you see any of our committee men tell them I haven't gone yet. Wait a minute — " he stopped me and peered into my face. "You'll keep this to yourself, I hope, old chap? No babbling."

"Why, of course not!" I muttered, wincing at the hint of offensive suspicion. "Have I ever said a word about anybody? Why, even in school I never blew the gaff on anybody, not even in games, and this is not a game, this is serious. How could you —"

Jackdaw did not let me finish the sentence. He patted me on the back with his skinny hand and smiled.

"All right, all right. Run along. Eh, you conspirator!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Fedka grew up and matured during the summer. He let his hair grow long, sported a black Russian blouse and a briefcase. With this briefcase, stuffed with newspapers, he rushed about from one school meeting to another. Fedka was chairman of the Class Committee. Fedka was delegate of the Technical High School to a meeting at the Girls' School. Fedka was the elected representative at the Parents' Meetings. He became expert at speechifying, quite a second Kruglikov. He'd clamber up onto a desk at debates on subjects such as "Must pupils answer their teachers sitting down or standing up?" or "Is card-playing permissible in a free country during Scripture?" He'd put one foot forward, thrust a hand under his belt, and start off: "Citizens, we call upon you... the situation is such... we bear responsibility for the destinies of the revolution..." He'd talk nineteen to the dozen.

We didn't seem to get on, Fedka and I. Things had not reached an open breach yet, but relations between us got worse day by day.

I stood aloof again.

The incident concerning my father had almost been forgotten, and the chill between myself and some of my former chums had begun to show signs of thawing, when this new wind blew from the capital; our

townspeople got wild with the Bolsheviks and closed down the club. The municipal militia arrested Baskakov, and here again I was to blame: why was I thick with the Bolsheviks, why had I hung out a flag on the roof of their club on May Day, why had I refused to help Fedka at the meeting hand out leaflets in favour of war to a victorious end?

All the boys at our school handed out leaflets. Some of them would grab batches of leaflets, not caring whether they were Cadet, anarchist, Christian Socialist or Bolshevik leaflets, and run off, thrusting them into the hands of passers-by. And these fellows got away with it, as if it was just as it should be.

How could I take the S.R. leaflets from Fedka when Baskakov had just given me a whole batch of his own to distribute? How could you hand out both the one and the other? I could understand if they were alike, but one of them says, "Long live victory over the Germans" and the other, "Down with the predatory war". One says, "Support the Provisional Government" and the other, "Down with the ten capitalist ministers" in that government. How can you heap them together, when one leaflet is prepared to devour the other?

Very little teaching was done at the time. The teachers sat at club meetings, and the avowed monarchists among them had resigned. Half the school was occupied by the Red Cross.

"I'm going to quit school, Mother," I used to say sometimes. "All the same we're not studying, and I'm at daggers drawn with everybody. Yesterday, for instance, Korenev went collecting with a cup for the benefit of the wounded; I had twenty kopeks, and dropped it in, but he scowled and says: 'The country doesn't need sops from rotters.' I could have bitten my lip through. And that in front of everybody! I says to him: 'If I'm the son of a deserter, you're the son of a thief. Your father's a contractor, he's robbed the army, and you too wouldn't mind making a bit out of the collections for the wounded.' We nearly had a fight over it. There's going to be a Comrades' Court in a few days. Who cares! Judges, they call themselves! They can go and eat coke!"

I always kept on me the pistol Father had given me. It was small and convenient, in a soft chamois-leather holster. I wore it not for self-defence. No one threatened to attack me yet, but it was dear to me as a keepsake, a present from my father — the only valuable thing I had. Another reason why I loved the Mauser was because of the pleasant

thrill and sense of pride I got from having it on me. Besides, I was fifteen at the time and I have never known a boy at that age who would refuse to have a real revolver. The only person who knew about the Mauser was Fedka. I had shown it to him when we were still friendly. I could see with what envy he had carefully examined my father's gift.

The day after that incident with Korenev I came into the classroom as usual of late — without greeting anyone or taking notice of anyone.

The first lesson was geography. The teacher spoke a little about western China, then paused to discuss the latest news from the papers. While this talk and discussion was going on I noticed that Fedka was writing notes and sending them round the desks. I started reading one of them over the shoulder of a boy in front of me and caught sight of my own name. It put me on my guard.

After the bell, I got up, keeping a watchful eye about me, and made for the door only to find it barred by a group of the form's strongest boys. A semi-circle was formed round me. Fedka stepped out from the middle of it and came towards me.

"What do you want?" I said.

"Hand over the gun," he said insolently. "The Class Committee has ruled that you are to hand over the gun to the Commissariat of the Municipal Militia. Hand it over to the Committee at once, and tomorrow you'll get a receipt for it from the militia."

"What gun are you talking about?" I queried, backing towards the window and trying my hardest to appear cool.

"Now don't deny it! Don't I know that you always carry a Mauser about with you? It's in your right pocket now too. You'd better hand it over voluntarily, or we'll call the militia. Come on!" He held his hand out.

"A Mauser?"

"Yes."

"You can have this, if you like!" I shouted, showing him a fig. "Did you give it to me? You didn't? Then go to hell before you get a punch in the jaw!"

Turning my head quickly, I saw four boys behind me, preparing to pounce on me. I sprang forward in an attempt to break through to the door. Fedka gripped my shoulder. I hit him with my fist, and was immediately seized by the shoulders and across the chest. Someone tried to

knock my hand out of my pocket. I clutched the pistol tight without taking my hand out.

"They'll take it away... They'll take it away in a minute..."

Then, like a trapped animal, I gave a scream, whipped the Mauser out, jerked up the safety catch with my thumb and pulled the trigger.

The four pairs of hands that gripped me instantly dropped away. I leapt onto the window-sill. From there I had a momentary glimpse of the chalky faces of the pupils, the yellow tile on the floor shattered by the shot, and the figure of Father Gennady arrested in the doorway like the biblical pillar of salt. I jumped without hesitation from the height of the first floor and landed in a bed of vivid-red dahlias.

Late that evening I climbed to the upstairs window of our house by way of the rain pipe in the back garden. I tried to climb quietly so as not to frighten anybody, but Mother heard a rustle and came up to the window, saying in a low voice:

"Who's that? Is that you, Boris?"

"It's me, Ma."

"Don't climb up the pipe, you may fall down. I'll open the door for you."

"Don't, Ma. I'll manage it."

Springing from the window-sill, I stopped, prepared to listen to her rebukes and complaint.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Mother asked in the same low voice. "Sit down, I'll get you some soup, it's still warm."

Deciding that Mother knew nothing, I kissed her and sat down at the table, thinking how to break the news to her. I could feel her eyes fixed on me intently. It was disconcerting, and I lowered my spoon to the edge of the plate.

"The Inspector was here," Mother said. "He said they were expelling you from the school and if you didn't hand your revolver in to the militia by twelve o'clock tomorrow they would notify the militia and have it taken away from you by force. Hand it over, Boris."

"I won't," I said doggedly, avoiding her eyes. "It's Daddy's."

"So what? What do you want it for? You'll get yourself another one later on. I don't know what's come over you these last few months, you've gone crazy. You may shoot somebody yet with that Mauser of yours! Take it to the militia tomorrow and hand it over."

"No," I said, speaking quickly and pushing my plate away. "I don't want another one, I want this one! It's Daddy's. I'm not crazy, I'm not touching anybody. Why don't they leave me alone? I don't care if they have expelled me, I would have quitted myself. I'll hide it away."

"My God!" Mother said with exasperation. "They'll put you in prison and keep you there until you give it up!"

"A fat lot I care," I said angrily. "They've put Baskakov in prison too. They can keep me in prison, but I won't give it up. I won't!" I shouted this out so loudly after a slight pause that Mother recoiled.

"All right, then don't," she said more gently. "It's all one to me." She paused musingly, then got up and added bitterly as she made for the door: "How much more of my life will you all burn up for me before my time!"

Mother's compliance surprised me. It was so unlike her. She rarely interfered in my affairs, but when she did take a thing into her head there was no stopping her.

I slept soundly. Timka came to me in my dreams and brought me a cuckoo for a present. "What do I want a cuckoo for, Timka?" Timka said nothing. "Cuckoo, cuckoo, how old am I?" It cuckooed seventeen times. "You're wrong," I said. "I'm only fifteen." "No," Timka said with a shake of the head. "Your mother has deceived you." "Why should Mother deceive me?" At this point I saw that Timka wasn't Timka at all, but Fedka. He stood there grinning.

I woke up, leapt out of bed and looked into the next room. It was five to seven. Mother wasn't at home. I had to make haste and hide the Mauser somewhere in the garden while nobody was about.

I slipped on my shirt and pulled the trousers off the chair — and a sudden chill ran up my spine. The trousers were suspiciously light. Carefully, as if afraid to burn my fingers, I put my hand in the pocket. I thought so — it was empty. Mother had taken the Mauser out while I slept. "So that's it... She's against me too. And I believed her yesterday. No wonder she gave in so easily. She must have taken it to the militia."

I wanted to run after her.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" the clock sang out, striking the hour. I stopped and glanced at the dial. What do you know? It was only seven o'clock. Where could she have gone so early? I looked round and noticed that

the big wicker basket was missing. That meant Mother had gone to the market.

But if she went to the market she could not have taken the Mauser with her. In that case she had hidden it away at home for the time being. But where? I decided immediately — in the top drawer of the cupboard, because it was the only drawer that locked.

I recollected that once, a long time ago, Mother had brought pink globules of corrosive sublimate from the chemist's and had locked them in that drawer out of harm's way. Fedka and I had planned to do away with the Simakovs' ginger cat because the Simakovs had broken the paw of our little dog. We had rummaged about in some iron junk and found a key to fit the lock. We took one of the pills and threw the key back in its place.

I went into the lumber-room and pulled out a heavy drawer. In my search I rummaged among bits of old iron, nuts, screws. I cut my hand on a piece of tin, but immediately found three rusty keys. One of them was sure to fit... This one, probably.

I went back to the cupboard. I rammed the key in with difficulty. It grated in the lock. Then with a click it opened. I pulled the drawer. There it was, my Mauser. And the holster, too, lying separate. I snatched both of them up. Locked the drawer, threw the key out of the window into the garden and ran out into the street. Glancing from side to side, I spotted Mother coming back from the market. So then I went round the corner and ran in the direction of the cemetery.

On the edge of the wood I stopped to recover my wind. I dropped onto a heap of dry leaves, breathing heavily and looking round from time to time to make sure no one was after me. A quiet little stream flowed past me. The water was clear but warm and smelt of water-plants. I scooped some water up in my hands without getting up and drank it, then dropped my head on my arms and started thinking.

What to do now? I couldn't go home again and I couldn't go to school. On second thoughts, though, I could have gone home... I could have hidden the Mauser and gone home. Mother would be angry with me for a while, then she'd forget it. It was her own fault, she shouldn't have taken the Mauser on the sly. But what if the militia comes? If I say that I lost it — they won't believe me. If I say it isn't mine, they'll ask whose it is. If I don't say anything, they may really throw me into prison! What

a cad, that Fedka! The rat!

Through the sparse trees on the edge of the wood I could see the railway station.

"U-u-u-u!" came the echo of a distant locomotive whistle. A wavy strip of white vapour spread along the track and a black engine, looking from here like a beetle, slowly rolled out from behind a bend.

"U-u-u-!" it hooted again, greeting the friendly hand of the outstretched semaphore.

"What if I..."

I sat up cautiously and began thinking again.

The more I thought, the more powerfully did the railway station lure me. It beckoned me with the hoot of its engines, the tuneful notes of the signal cabins, the almost tangible smell of burning petrol and the glistening track running out into unfamiliar horizons.

"I'll go to Nizhni Novgorod," I thought. "There I'll find Jackdaw. He's in Sormovo. He'll be glad and he'll let me stay with him for a while. Things will quieten down, and then I'll go home. And maybe..." — here I felt a sort of inner prompting — "maybe I won't go back."

"Yes, that's decided," I resolved with sudden firmness, and as the importance of this decision dawned on me, I stood up, feeling at once big, strong and determined.

CHAPTER FIVE

The train arrived in Nizhni Novgorod in the night. I immediately found myself on the big square outside the railway station. The shoulder-straps and bayonets of brand-new rifles glinted under the lights of the street lamps.

A ginger-bearded man was addressing the soldiers from a platform about the necessity of defending the homeland. He assured them of the inevitable and speedy defeat of "the accursed German imperialists".

He kept turning towards the man next to him — an old colonel, who every time nodded his bald round head approvingly, as though certifying the correctness of the ginger speaker's conclusions.

The speaker looked exhausted. He beat his chest with the flat of his hand, and raised one arm, then both arms in turn. He appealed to the

conscience of the soldiers. Towards the end, when he thought his oration had penetrated the grey mass, he swung his arm round, barely missing the ear of the startled colonel, who recoiled to avoid it, and began to sing the *Marseillaise* at the top of his voice. A score or two of scattered voices joined in, but the column of soldiers was silent.

The ginger orator broke off his song, threw his cap down on the ground and climbed down from the platform.

The old colonel spread his hands in a helpless gesture and with head bent, climbed down, holding on to the banister.

This turned out to be a battalion of draft reinforcements bound for the German front.

The soldiers had marched to the railway station with songs, and had had flowers and gifts thrown to them. Everything had gone well until they reached the station, where it was discovered that owing to someone's remissness, there was not enough boiling water for tea to go round and some of the boxcars were not fitted with sufficient plankbeds. The disgruntled soldiers started holding a meeting.

Speakers appeared whom the command had not invited, and having begun with tea, the battalion suddenly came to the conclusion: "We've had enough of it. At home the farms are going to the dogs, the landowners' land hasn't been shared out, and we're fed up with this war!"

Bonfires were lighted, and the air smelled of resinous split boards, tobacco, dried fish dumped in stacks at the nearby docks, and the fresh wind of the Volga.

Excited and thrilled, I walked into the darkness of unfamiliar streets adjoining the railway station, past the bonfires, past the rifles, past the excited soldiers, the shouting orators, and the dismayed and furious officers.

The first passer-by whom I asked the way to Sormovo answered with an air of surprise:

"You can't walk from here to Sormovo, my dear chap. People go to Sormovo from here by boat. You pay your fifty kopeks and climb aboard. But there won't be any boat now till the morning."

After wandering about a bit, I got into one of the empty cases piled up under a wall somewhere and decided to sit it out there till the morning. Soon I fell asleep.

I was wakened by a song. Stevedores were singing as they loaded something heavy.

Heave-ho, lads, easy does it!

a cracked but pleasant tenor voice led the singing.

The rest joined in with raucous voices:

Try, try and try again.

Something shifted with a loud creaking.

Yoho ... we started all right,
But the tykes still sit tight.

I poked my head out. Like ants around a piece of rye bread, the stevedores surrounded a huge rusty winch, which they were dragging up inclined rails onto a flatcar. The song leader, unseen among the crowd, started again:

Yoho ... we've kicked out Nikolai,
Yoho ... but what's the blessed good!

Something creaked again.

Come on, folks, rise up all,
And dump old Alec in the lake!

There was a clank and a thud. The winch sank heavily onto the flatcar. The song broke off and voices rose, shouting, talking and swearing.

"Some song!" I thought. "Who on earth is Alec? Why, that must be Kerensky! In Arzamas, for a song like that, they'd run you in jolly quick, but here the militiaman stands by and turns away as if he doesn't hear anything."

The dirty little steamboat had long stood moored at the dock. I didn't have fifty kopeks for my fare, and the narrow gangway was guarded by a ticket collector and a sailor with a rifle.

I bit my nails and gazed miserably at the strip of oily water gurgling between the dock and the boat's side. Watermelon rind, wood splinters, scraps of newspaper and other rubbish floated on the water.

"Maybe I should ask the ticket collector to let me through?" I said to myself. "I'll tell him a story about being an orphan or something. Come to visit a sick grandmother. Please, let me through to go and see the old lady."

The oily surface of the turbid water reflected my sunburnt face, my close-cropped large head, and the shining brass buttons of my school tunic.

With a sigh, I decided that the orphan story were best dropped. Orphans with such healthy faces were not very credible.

I had read in books that some boys, having no money to pay their fare, worked their passage before the mast as ship's boys. But this device was no good here, as all I had to do was to cross to the other side.

"What are you standing there? Move up!" I heard a saucy voice and saw a small boy with a pock-marked face.

He tossed a batch of leaflets onto a case and quickly pulled a thick dirty fag-end from under my foot.

"Ugh, you gawk!" he said. "What a fag-end you've missed!"

I told him I didn't give a damn for fag-ends, as I did not smoke and in turn asked him what he was doing here.

"Me?" The boy spat with such accuracy of aim that he hit the middle of a log that floated past. "I'm handing out leaflets for our Committee."

"What Committee's that?"

"The workers' Committee, of course. Want to help me?"

"I wouldn't mind, only I've got to get to Sormovo and I haven't got a ticket."

"What d'you want in Sormovo?"

"I've come to my uncle. He's working at the factory there."

"That's too bad," the boy said reprovingly. "Fancy coming to visit your uncle without a penny in your pocket!"

"I didn't have time," the words tumbled from my lips. "It was all so sudden — I ran away from home."

"You don't say so?" The boy's eyes slid over me with a look of incredulity and curiosity. Then, with a sniff, he added sympathetically: "You'll get it hot from your father when you go back."

"I'm not going back. Besides, I haven't got a father. They killed him in the tsarist times. My father was a Bolshevik."

"And mine's a Bolshevik," the boy inserted quickly. "Only mine's alive. My father's a big man, second to none in all Sormovo. You ask anybody you like — 'Where does Pavel Korchagin live?' — and everyone'll tell you: 'Oh, that's the Committee. Ter-Akopov's factory in Varikha.' Yes sir, that's the kind of man my father is!"

The boy flung the fag-end away, and, hitching up his trousers, which kept slipping down, he dived into the crowd, leaving the leaflets next to me.

I picked one up. It said that Kerensky was a traitor, who was pre-

paring an agreement with the counter-revolutionary General Kornilov. The leaflet openly called for the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the proclamation of Soviet Power.

The sharp tone of the leaflet surprised me more than the audacious song of the stevedores had done. The boy popped up, panting, from behind some herring barrels, and cried out to me as he ran: "Nothing doing, old chap!"

"What?" I said blankly.

"I tried to get fifty kopeks. I saw Simon Kotikin here — one of our chaps. Said he didn't have it."

"What d'you want fifty kopeks for?"

"But *you* want it, don't you?" he looked at me in surprise. "You'd have bought a ticket with it, and in Sormovo you'd get the money from your uncle and give it back. I'm a Sormovo boy too."

He disappeared again and reappeared as quickly.

"We'll manage it without a ticket, old chap. Take my leaflets and go straight onto the boat. See that sailor standing there with the rifle? That's Pashka Surkov. When you pass up the gangway turn to him and say, I'm taking these leaflets for the Committee, and don't talk to the ticket collector at all. Go straight ahead. The sailor's one of our men, he'll stand up for you in case of anything."

"And you?"

"I'll get through anywhere, old chap. I'm a local man."

The grubby old steamboat, bestrewn with husks and apple cores, had long pushed off, but there was no sign of my companion.

I found a place for myself on a heap of rusty anchor chains, and, breathing in the cool air, which smelt of apples, petrol and fish, I examined the passengers with curiosity. Next to me sat a priest — he may have been a deacon or a monk — very quiet, trying to look as if he wasn't there. He glanced around him furtively, taking bites at a watermelon and carefully spitting the pips out into his hand.

Besides the monk, there were several peasant women with empty milk cans, two officers, and four militiamen, who kept somewhat aloof next to a civilian with a red band round his arm.

All the rest of the boat's passengers were workmen. Standing about in groups, they talked loudly, argued, swore, laughed and read out from the newspaper. It looked as if they were all acquainted with one another,

the way some of them butted in on the arguing groups. Remarks and jokes flew from one side of the boat to the other.

Sormovo loomed ahead. It was a windless morning. The smoke of the factories, gathering in curling wreaths, looked from here like black boughs spread over the stone trunks of the gigantic chimneys.

"Hullo!" I heard the familiar voice of my young companion behind me.

I was pleased, because I did not know what to do with the leaflets.

He sat down next to me on the coil, drew an apple from his pocket and offered it to me.

"Take it. The stevedores gave me a capful, because I always go to them first when there's a new leaflet or a newspaper. Yesterday they gave me a whole string of *voblas.** Doesn't cost 'em anything. Just stick an arm into the sack, that's all. I ate three of those *voblas* myself and took two of 'em home — one for Anka, the other for Manka. My two sisters," he explained, adding condescendingly: "Silly little toads. Always hungry."

The lively talk suddenly broke off, as the civilian with the read band, accompanied by the militiamen, suddenly started to check the passengers' documents. The workers silently produced crumpled greasy papers and passed icy hostile remarks.

"Who are they looking for?"

"The devil knows 'em."

I'dlike to see 'em coming to Sormovo and making a search there!"

The militiamen looked reluctant; they obviously felt uncomfortable under the gaze of dozens of pairs of suspicious, watchful eyes.

Taking no notice of the general suppressed resentment, the civilian, with a defiant twitch of his eyebrows, went up to the monk. The monk shrank into himself still more, and spreading his hands, pointed to the cup hanging from his neck, bearing the inscription: "Good Christians, make a donation towards rebuilding the churches destroyed by the Germans."

The civilian turned away with a grimace of distaste and pulled my companion rather unceremoniously by the shoulder.

"Identity papers?"

"When I grow up!" the boy answered gruffly.

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* *Vobla* — a dried salted fish.— *Tr.*

In trying to disengage his shoulder from the grip of the civilian the boy twisted his body, lost his balance and dropped the batch of leaflets.

The civilian picked up one of them, hurriedly read it, and said in a low angry voice:

"You're too little to have identity papers, but grown-up enough for propaganda leaflets, eh? Seize him!"

But the civilian was not the only one who had read the leaflet. The wind tore a dozen or so of the white papers out of the scattered batch and swept them over the crowded deck. Before the apathetic, confused militiamen could step up to the boy, the whole deck became a buzzing hive.

"Why don't you look for Kornilov!"

"You didn't bother the monk about his documents! Leave the boy alone!"

"You're not in town now, this is Sormovo."

"Now then, none of your lip!" the civilian snapped, glancing apprehensively at the militiamen.

"Oh, go and swallow yourself! Disguised gendarme! See how he pounced on those leaflets?"

A piece of fresh cucumber flew past the civilian's cap.

Pressed in from all sides by the surge of passengers the militiamen looked round in dismay, muttering:

"Stand back! Stand back, there. Quiet, citizens!"

Suddenly an ear-splitting blast came from the siren and somebody on the captain's bridge yelled wildly:

"Keep away from the portside! You'll capsize the boat!"

The crowd rushed to the other side across the heeling deck. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion the civilian swore fiercely at the militiamen and slipped away to the ladder leading to the bridge, where the two officers stood, white-faced and agitated.

The boat moored and the workers got off hurriedly. I discovered the boy at my side again. His eyes were shining, and he clutched the crumpled batch of leaflets to him with both outspread hands.

"Come and see me!" he shouted. "Straight to Varikha. Ask for Vaska Korchagin, anyone will show you."

CHAPTER SIX

I glanced with surprise and curiosity at the little houses, grey with smoke and soot, at the stone walls of the factories, through the dark windows of which I caught glimpses of bright tongues of flame and the muffled roar of imprisoned machines.

It was the dinner hour. A locomotive towing some flatcars loaded with wheels rolled past me straight across the road, scaring the stray dogs with a jet of steam. Whistles shrilled in varied keys. Crowds of sweating, tired workers came out of the gates.

Flocks of barefooted urchins ran towards them, lugging small bundles containing bowls and plates, which smelt of onions, sour cabbage and steam.

By crooked little streets I at last reached the street where Jackdaw lived.

I knocked on the window of a small wooden house. A skinny grey-haired old woman, tearing herself away from the washtub, poked out a red face and gruffly asked me who I wanted.

I told her.

"He doesn't live here any more. Moved out a long time ago," she said, slamming the window to.

Stunned by this news, I went round the corner and stopped next to a mound of piled-up cobblestones, feeling how tired I was, how hungry and sleepy.

The only other person I knew in Sormovo was Uncle Nikolai, my mother's brother. But I did not know where he lived or worked, and how he would receive me.

I wandered about the streets for several hours peering with dogged obstinacy into the faces of passers-by. Of course, I did not come across my uncle.

Feeling desperately lonely, lost and helpless, I sank onto a sickly-looking grass plot cluttered with fish skin and lumps of lime, which had turned yellow from the rain. I lay down there and shut my eyes, thinking of my sad plight and failures.

The more I thought the sadder I felt and the more senseless my flight from home seemed to me.

Even so, I shied at the idea of returning to Arzamas. It seemed to me that I would be lonelier than ever there; everybody would sneer at me,

the way they used to sneer at Tupikov. Mother would suffer quietly, and for all I know she might go to school to ask the Headmaster to take me back.

But I was obstinate. Back in Arzamas I had seen real strong life rushing past our town in trains amid a shower of sparks and flashing lights. It seemed to me that all I had to do was to jump onto one of the steps of the flying cars, if only on the very edge of it, and grip the handrails hard, and then no one could push me off again.

An old man came up to the hoarding. He was carrying a pail, a brush and rolled-up posters. He laid the paste thickly on the bill-boards, stuck a poster onto it, and smoothed it down to take out the creases. He put his pail down on the ground and called me up.

"Get the matches out of my pocket, sonny — my hands are sticky with paste. Thanks," he added, when I had lighted a match and held it to his pipe.

When he had got it going, he picked his pail up with a grunt and said good-naturedly:

"Ah, me, old age is no joy! I used to swing a sledgehammer with the best of 'em, and now my arm grows numb from carrying a pail."

"Let me carry it for you, grandpa," I offered. "My arm won't grow numb. I'm as strong as anything."

And as if fearing that he wouldn't agree, I hastily drew the pail towards me.

"All right," the old man readily agreed. "Carry it, if you like. We'll do the job quicker together."

We walked down the fences, passing through many streets.

The moment we stopped passers-by would gather behind us, curious to see what we were pasting up. Warming to the job, I quite forgot my own misfortunes. There were all kinds of slogans. One of them was: "Eight hours work, eight hours sleep, eight hours rest." Truth to tell, this slogan struck me as being rather prosy and uninteresting. The blue poster with the heavy red letters appealed to me much more. It said: "Only with arms in hand will the proletariat win the bright kingdom of socialism."

This "bright kingdom" which the proletariat was to win fascinated me by its haunting beauty far more than the glamour of those exotic lands which dazzled the minds of Mayne Reid's young readers. Those lands, far off though they were, had nevertheless been explored, divided and

charted on dull school maps. But this "bright kingdom" mentioned in the poster had not been conquered by anybody yet. No human foot had yet trod its mysterious precincts.

"Maybe you're tired, lad?" the old man said, stopping. "Run along home then. I'll manage myself now."

"Oh, no, I'm not a bit tired," I said, thinking bitterly that I would soon be alone again.

"Righto then," the old man said. "But mind they don't scold you when you get home."

"I've got no home," I said in a sudden burst of frankness. "I mean, I've got a home, but it's far away."

And giving way to a desire to unburden my heart to someone, I told the old man everything.

He heard me out attentively and looked at me steadily with a slightly mocking glance.

"This wants looking into," he said calmly. "Sormovo's a big place, but a man's not a needle. Your uncle's a fitter, you say?"

"He was," I answered, cheering up. "His name is Nikolai. Nikolai Dubryakov. He must be a Party man, like Dad. Maybe they know him at the Committee?"

"No, I don't seem to know him. Never mind, when we've finished with these posters you'll come with me. I'll ask some of our people."

The old man's face clouded for some reason and he walked along in silence, puffing at his pipe.

"So your father was killed?" he suddenly said.

"Yes."

The old man wiped his hand on his patched greasy trousers and patted my back, saying:

"You'll come to my place. We'll have some potatoes with onions and heat up water for tea. You must be hungry, I daresay?"

The pail seemed quite light to me. And my running away from Arzamas struck me again as being necessary and sensible.

They traced my uncle. He turned out to be not a fitter but foreman of the boiler shop.

My uncle told me tersely not to be a fool and to go home.

"You can do nothing here. A man can only make good when he knows

his place," he said morosely the very first day at dinner, wiping his brick-coloured moustache with a tea-cloth. "I know my place. I was an apprentice, then a fitter, and now I've worked my way up to foreman. Now, why did I make good and another man didn't? Because he likes to argle-bargle. He doesn't like to work, if you please, he envies the engineer. Wants to fly high right away. Now, take yourself, why didn't you stick it out at school? You'd ha' studied quietly for a doctor, say, or a technician. But no, you wanted to be clever. Laziness, that's what it is. If you ask me, once a man is fixed with a job, he should try to work his way up at it. Take it slowly, steadily. That's the only way you can get on."

"But, Uncle Nikolai," I said quietly in a pained voice. "Take Father, for example. He was a soldier. According to you he should have entered a school for junior officers. He would be an officer. Might get promoted to captain. And everything he did, and the fact that he became an underground worker instead of a captain, was unnecessary then?"

Uncle frowned.

"I don't want to say anything bad about your father, but I don't see much sense in what he did. He was a muddle-headed man, a trouble-maker, if you ask me. He very nearly got me into it. The office had just picked me out for the post of foreman, when all of a sudden they come and tell me: "So that's the kind o' relative who came to stay with you?' I barely managed to hush up the affair."

My uncle got a meaty bone out of the bowl, smeared it thickly with mustard and salt, and sank his strong yellow teeth into it, shaking his head ruefully.

When his wife, a tall handsome woman, served him after dinner with home-made kvass in an earthenware painted mug, he said to her:

"I'll have a nap, wake me up in an hour's time. I'll have to drop sister Varvara a line. Boris will take it when he goes."

"When will he go?"

"Why, tomorrow, of course."

Someone tapped at the window.

"Uncle Nikolai," a voice came from the street, "are you going to the meeting?"

"Going where?"

"To the meeting. Crowds of people have come to the square."

"Catch me going to their meeting!" my uncle said.

Waiting until my uncle lay down to take his nap, I quietly slipped out into the street.

"My uncle's an artful dodger, I see," I said to myself. "Fancies himself a big pot. Foreman! And I thought he was a Party man. D'you mean to say I'll have to go back to Arzamas?"

Some two or three thousand people stood in front of a wooden platform listening to speakers. I caught sight among the crowd of the pock-marked face of that pushful young chap Vaska Korchagin. I hailed him, but he did not hear me.

I started after him. Once or twice his curly head appeared among the crowd, only to disappear again for good. I couldn't get any nearer to the platform. I stopped to listen. One speaker followed another. I remember one of them, a plain-looking poorly dressed man, resembling a workman, of whom hundreds walked the streets of Sormovo without attracting any attention. He pulled off his pancaked cap with an awkward gesture, cleared his throat, and began to speak in a strained and, what seemed to me, embittered voice.

"You comrades from the locomotive shop, the car shop and many others of you know that I spent eight years in a convict prison as a political. And no sooner did I come out, before I had time to fill my lungs with fresh air, when bang! — I landed in jail for another two months! Who locked me in? Not the policemen of the old regime, but the toadies of the new regime. One didn't mind so much doing a stretch under the tsar. Our people always got it from the tsar. But getting it from these toadies is the bloody limit. The generals and officers strut about with red bows, you'd think they were friends of the revolution. But we chaps get slapped into jail for the least little thing. We're hounded and chivvied about. It's not my own grievance I'm speaking about, comrades, not because I did two months extra time. It's your grievance, the workers' grievance, I'm talking about."

He started coughing. When the fit was over and he opened his mouth to speak again, another fit of coughing came on. He stood there for quite a time, trembling and clutching the banister, then he shook his head and climbed down.

"They've broken his wind all right!" someone said in a loud indignant voice.

Powdery snow, the first of the season, fell from a grey overcast sky.

A dry cold wind tore the last darkened leaves off the trees. My feet were chilled. I wanted to get out of the crowd to warm myself with walking. While elbowing my way out I lost sight of the speakers, when suddenly a familiar high-pitched voice made me look round towards the platform. The powdery snow blinded me. I was pushed about. Someone trod painfully on my foot. Getting up on tiptoe I was surprised and overjoyed to see the familiar bearded face of Jackdaw on the platform.

Pushing my way with difficulty through the dense crowd, I moved forward. I was afraid that Jackdaw would finish his speech and mix with the crowd. He would not hear me calling him and I would lose him. I waved my cap to attract his attention, but he did not notice me.

Seeing Jackdaw lift his hand on a rising note to wind up his speech, I cried out:

"Semyon Ivanovich! Semyon Ivanovich!"

Someone nearby hissed at me. A hand jabbed at my back. But I yelled still more wildly:

"Semyon Ivanovich!"

I saw Jackdaw spread his hands in a gesture of surprise, then he hurriedly finished the sentence and hastened down the steps.

An angry man in the crowd seized my arm and dragged me aside.

But I took no notice of the cursing and rough handling, and laughed gaily, crazily.

"Here, you hooligan, what's your little game?" the workman who had seized my arm demanded, giving me a shake.

"I'm not a hooligan," I said, smiling blissfully and dancing about on my chilled feet. "I've found Jackdaw. Semyon Ivanovich..."

There must have been something in my face that made the man smile.

"A jackdaw?" he said in a milder tone.

"Not a jackdaw. Semyon Ivanovich. There he comes..."

Jackdaw appeared through the crowd and gripped my shoulder.

"What are you doing here?"

The crowd became agitated. A murmur rose above the square. All around us were resentful, excited and bewildered faces.

"Semyon Ivanovich," I said, ignoring his question, "what's all this excitement about?"

"A telegram's just arrived," he said quickly. "Kerensky is betraying the revolution. General Kornilov has run away to the Don and is raising the Cossacks."

The short autumn days flashed past me like so many wayside stations rushing past an express train in a blaze of lights. A job was quickly found for me too. I, too, became a useful person, who was drawn into the vortex of rapidly developing events.

On one such turbulent day Jackdaw said to me in an anxious tone:

"Run down to the Committee, Boris. Tell them Varikha has asked for a propagandist and I've gone down there. Find Yershov and tell him to go to the printer's for me. If you don't find Yershov, then... Give me a pencil. Take this note down to the printing-house. Not to the office, hand it personally to the maker-up. You remember him — that dark man in spectacles you met at Korchagin's. When you're through, come and join me in Varikha. If there are any fresh leaflets at the Committee, take some along. Tell Pavel I asked you to. Wait a minute!" he shouted after me. "It's cold outside. Put on my old mack at least."

But I was already off, charging down the street with the fine abandon of a cavalry horse going at full stretch, jumping over puddles and potholes in the muddy roadway.

In the doorway of the Party Committee, which was as noisy as a railway station before the departure of a train, I ran into Korchagin. If it hadn't been him, but somebody smaller and weaker, I would have knocked him over. As it is, I ran smack into him as if he were a telegraph pole.

"What's the hurry!" he said quickly. "Have you dropped off the roof?"

"No," I said, abashed, rubbing my bruised head and breathing hard. "Semyon Ivanovich sent me to tell you he's at Varikha..."

"I know, they phoned up."

"He also asked for leaflets."

"They've been sent already. What else?"

"I have to tell Yershov to go to the printer's. Here's a note."

"What's that about the printer's? Let's see that note," an armed workman in an army coat thrown over an old jacket interrupted our conversation.

"What's biting Semyon?" he said to Korchagin after reading the note.

"What's he worrying about the printing-house? I sent a guard down there soon after dinner."

More and more people kept coming up to the door. It was wide open, despite the cold, and revealed glimpses of greatcoats, blouses, and faded brown leather jackets. Two men in the passage were breaking open a case with hammers. Amid the straw packing lay brand-new rifles thickly smeared with oil. Several similar empty cases lay in the mud outside.

Korchagin reappeared, accompanied by three armed workmen.

"Go down quickly," he said to them. "And stay there. Let no one through without a pass from the Committee. Send someone from there to tell us how you've fixed up."

"Who shall we send?"

"Oh, anyone of our people who happens to be around."

"I'll be around!" I cried, experiencing a strong excitement and a desire to keep up with the others.

"Take him, then. He runs fast."

Here I noticed that almost every man coming out of the Committee office took a rifle from the broken case.

"Comrade Korchagin," I said, "everybody's taking a rifle. May I take one?"

"What's that?" he queried with annoyance, breaking off his conversation with a strong tattooed sailor.

"I want a rifle! I'm as good as the next man, aren't I?"

A loud voice in the next room called Korchagin and he hurried away, waving a hand at me.

It may have been just a gesture of dismissal, but I interpreted it as one of permission. I snatched a rifle from the case, and pressing it close, I ran after the armed guards who had started off down the street.

As I ran across the yard I heard the latest news which had just been received: the Soviet power had been proclaimed in Petrograd, Kerensky had run away, and fighting was going on in Moscow with the military cadets.

III. The Front

CHAPTER ONE

Six months had passed.

A letter addressed to my mother was posted one sunny April day at the railway station.

"Mamma,

"Goodbye, goodbye! I am going away to join the group of gallant Comrade Sivers, who is fighting the White troops of Kornilov and Kaledin. Three of us are going. We have been given documents from the Sormovo combat squad, to which I and Belka belonged. They did not want to give it to me at first, they said I was too young. I had a job persuading Jackdaw, who arranged it for me. He would have gone himself, only he's weak and he coughs badly. My head is hot with joy. Everything that happened before is child's play. The real thing in life is only just beginning, that's why I feel on top of the world."

On the third day of our journey, during a six-hour stop at a small station, we learned that there were signs of unrest in the countryside around us. Small gangs of bandits had appeared, and in some places there had been fighting between the kulaks and the food-collecting teams. It was late at night when an engine was hitched to our train. My comrades and I lay side by side on the top ledge of the converted boxcar. Hearing the measured click of the wheels and the creak of the rocking car, I pulled my heavy cloth coat over my head and prepared to go to sleep.

Sounds of snoring, coughing and scratching could be heard in the darkness. Those who had been able to squeeze in on the ledge were sleeping. From the dense huddle of the less fortunate passengers sitting on the floor there came mutterings, grumblings, swearing and pushing.

"Don't push, there," a bass voice grumbled. "What are you trying to do — push me off my sack? I'll push you into the middle o' next week if you're not careful!"

"Look at him, the devil!" came a shrill angry feminine voice. "Sticking his boots right into my face! Come off it, damn you!"

A lighted match dimly revealed a stirring heap of boots, sacks, baskets, caps, arms and legs, then it went out, leaving a still greater darkness. Someone in the corner was telling a long tedious story of his sad life in a dreary monotone. A sympathiser puffed at his cigarette. The car quivered like a gadfly-bitten horse and moved along the rails in jerks.

I woke up from a tug at my sleeve by one of my companions. I looked up and felt a jet of cold refreshing air from the open window fan my hot face. The train was going slowly, probably uphill. A fiery glow lit up the whole skyline. Above it, as if seared by the flames of the conflagration, the stars faded like glow-worms and the pale moon melted in the sky.

"The land's in revolt," a calm cheerful voice came out of a dark corner.

"Asking for the whip, that's what it is," a voice answered savagely from another corner.

A sudden crash interrupted the talk. The car swayed and bumped, and I fell off the ledge onto the heads of the people below. Pandemonium broke loose in the darkness and everyone rushed to the open door of the boxcar amid screams.

An accident.

I landed in a ditch alongside the embankment, after jumping out just in time to avoid being crushed by the hurtling bodies of the passengers. Shots were fired twice. A man next to me, with outspread shaking hands, muttered hastily:

"That's all right ... that's all right. Only don't run, or they'll open fire on us. They're not Whites, they're local villagers. They only rob you and let you go."

Two men armed with rifles ran up to the car, shouting:

"Get back! Get back into the car!"

The passengers made a dash for the boxcars. In the rush I stumbled and fell into a damp ditch. Quick as a lizard, I flattened myself on the ground and crawled towards the tail of the train. Our car was the one before last, and in a minute I drew level with the dim signal lantern of the rear car. A man was standing there with a rifle. I wanted to turn back, but he

evidently spotted someone on the far side of the embankment and ran towards him. In a bound, I reached the brow of a ravine and rolled down the slippery clayey slope. At the bottom I got up and dragged myself to the bushes, barely lifting my feet, which were plastered with clay.

The forest, covered in a haze of young greenery, had sprung to life. Somewhere far away cocks were exchanging lusty calls. Loud croaking came from a nearby clearing where the frogs had come out to warm themselves. Here and there in the shade still lay islets of grey snow, but in the sunny spaces last year's stiff grass was already dry. I rested, and cleaned the clay off my boots with a piece of birch bark. Then I plucked a handful of grass, dipped it in the water and wiped my muddy face with it.

These were unfamiliar places. How was I to get out of here to the nearest railway station? I could hear dogs barking — there must be a village nearby. What if I went and asked the way? I might walk into a kulak ambush, though. They'll ask me — who are you, where do you come from? And I have a paper on me, and a Mauser in my pocket. I could hide the paper in my boot, say, but what about the pistol? Throw it away?

I took it out and turned it over in my hands. I couldn't do it. The little Mauser with its glint of burnished steel sat so snugly in my hand that I felt ashamed of my thoughts. I stroked it and put it back under my jacket, in a secret pocket sewn to the lining.

It was a bright morning and the world was full of sounds. Sitting on a tree stump in the middle of a yellow clearing, I could not believe that danger lurked anywhere.

"Ping, ping... trrrr!" I heard a familiar whistle close by me. A blue titmouse alighted on a bough overhead and regarded me curiously with a cocked eye.

"Ping, ping ... trrrr ... hullo!" it warbled, hopping from one foot to the other.

I couldn't help smiling as I thought of Timka Shtukin. He called the titmice "fooltails". It seemed only the other day — the titmice, the cemetery, our games. And now? I knitted my brows. Something had to be done!

A whip cracked close by and cows mooed. "A herd," I said to myself. "I'll go and ask the herdsman the way. What harm can a herdsman do me? I'll ask him and clear off as quick as I can."

A small herd of cows, lazily tearing up the tufts of old grass, moved slowly down the edge of the wood. Alongside walked an old herdsman with a big

heavy stick. I sauntered up to him with the calm unhurried air of a man taking a walk.

"Good morning, grandpa!"

"Good morning!" he answered after slight hesitation and stopped to examine me.

"How far is it to the railway station?"

"The station? What station may you be wanting?"

I was stumped. I did not know what station I wanted, but the old man himself helped me out.

"Alexandrovka, you mean?"

"That's right. I was going there, but I must have strayed a bit."

"Where are you coming from?"

I was at a loss again.

"From over there," I said as calmly as I could, with a vague gesture in the direction of a village that could be seen in the distance.

"H'm ... from over there... Demenevo, you mean?"

"That's right, Demenevo."

At this point I heard the growl of a dog and footsteps. I looked round and saw a strapping lad coming towards the old man. Evidently the herdsboy.

"What is it, Uncle Alexander?" he asked, chewing at a lump of rye bread.

"A passer-by here. Asking the way to Alexandrovka station. Says he's coming from Demenevo."

The boy stopped chewing and stared at me blankly.

"How can that be?" he said.

"That's just what puzzles me, seeing as Demenevo's right next to the station. Alexandrovka, Demenevo — they're both one. What wind could have blown him here?"

"We must send him to the village," the lad suggested coolly. "Let the military post sort it out there. He can tell you any story!"

Although I had no idea what sort of post this was and how they would sort things out, I had no desire to go to the village if only because the villages round about here were rich ones and unquiet. Losing no time, therefore, I leapt aside and plunged into the wood.

The herdsboy soon lagged behind, but the accursed dog managed to take a couple of snaps at my leg. I felt no pain at the time, though, neither did I feel the lashing branches, which spread clawing fingers in front of my

face, nor the mounds and tree stumps that cropped up underfoot.

I roamed about the forest till nightfall. It wasn't a wild forest, because there were stumps of felled trees in it.

The deeper I tried to get into the forest, the fewer grew the trees and the more often did I come across clearings with traces of horse hooves and dung. Night came, and I was tired, hungry and covered with scratches. I chose a dry secluded spot under a bush, put a billet of wood under my head for a pillow and lay down. Fatigue began to tell. My cheeks were hot and the leg the dog had bitten was hurting me.

"I'll go to sleep," I decided. "It's night-time now, no one will find me here. I'm tired, I'll go to sleep, and in the morning I'll think of something."

As I dozed off I thought of Arzamas, the pond, our war on the rafts, my bed under the old warm blanket. I thought of the pigeons Fedka and I had caught and roasted on Fedka's frying pan. Afterwards we ate them in secret. The pigeons were so tasty...

A wind whistled through the tree-tops. The forest seemed empty and frightening. The old town of Arzamas floated up in my mind warm and fragrant, like a rich festive pie.

I turned my collar up and felt an unbidden tear roll down my cheek. But I didn't cry after all.

That night, numb with cold, I kept jumping up, running about the clearing. I tried to climb up a birch tree and even began to dance to warm myself up. Then I lay down again and after a while, when the woodland mists robbed me of my warmth, I jumped up again.

CHAPTER TWO

The sun rose again and it got warm. The birds tweeted and files of cranes trumpeted cheerfully in the sky. I was smiling by now, glad that the night was over, and there were no longer any gloomy thoughts in my mind, except perhaps one — that of getting something to eat.

I had not gone more than two hundred paces when I heard geese cackling and pigs grunting, and through the foliage I spotted the green painted roof of a solitary farmhouse.

"I'll creep up," I decided. "If there's nothing suspicious I'll ask the way and ask for something to eat."

I stood behind an elder bush. It was quiet. There was no sign of any people, and thin smoke rose from the chimney. A small flock of geese came waddling towards me. A faint snap of a breaking twig sounded next to me. Instantly I braced my legs and turned my head. But fright immediately gave way to astonishment. From behind a bush, within ten paces of me, a pair of human eyes looked at me intently. The owner of those eyes was not the master of the farmhouse, because he too was hiding in the bushes, watching the farmyard. We stared at each other guardedly, like two wild beasts who had met, both hunting the same prey. Then, by tacit agreement, we drew back into the thickets and went up to each other.

He was the same height as I was. I took him to be about seventeen. His strong muscular figure was clothed in a double-breasted jacket of black cloth, on which there was not a single button. It looked as if the buttons had been specially cut off. Several dry burrs clung to his trousers, which he wore inside his clay-bespattered high boots.

His pale creased face with dark rings under the eyes suggested that he, too, had probably spent the night in the woods.

"Thinking of going there?" he said quietly, nodding his head in the direction of the farmhouse.

"Yes," I answered. "And you?"

"They won't give you anything. Three hefty men there — I've seen them already. You never know what you're up against."

"Then what's to be done? We must eat!"

"We must," he agreed. "But not by begging. No one gives alms these days. Who are you?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply, added: "Never mind. We'll get something ourselves. It's very difficult, I've tried, but the two of us will manage it. Geese are wandering about in the bushes here — big fat ones."

"But they don't belong to us."

He looked at me as if surprised to hear such a silly remark.

"Everything belongs to everybody these days," he said quietly. "Get round the back of the clearing and drive a goose quietly towards me. I'll hide behind a bush."

Singling out a fat grey goose who had strayed from the flock I barred its path. The goose turned and walked away slowly, stopping now and then

to peck at the ground. Step by step I headed it into the ambush. It was almost level with the bush, when suddenly its neck curved and it looked suspiciously in my direction, puzzled at my persistent pursuit. Then, with an air of decision, it turned back, but the stranger, with the swiftness of a cat springing on a sparrow, darted out from behind the bush and grabbed the goose's neck with both hands. The bird barely had time to cry out. The disturbed flock started honking, and the stranger plunged into the woods with the fluttering goose. I followed him.

The goose flapped its wings and kicked its legs for a long time and only stopped struggling when we reached a secluded spot in a ravine. The stranger tossed it onto the ground, and getting out some tobacco, said breathing heavily:

"This'll do. We can stop here."

He got out a penknife and started to draw the goose in silence, every now and then glancing in my direction.

I collected brushwood and piled up a heap of it.

"Got any matches?" I asked.

"Here," he said, handing me a box of matches with bloodstained fingers. "Use them sparingly."

I had a good look at him now. The film of dust that had settled on his face could not conceal the smooth whiteness of his mobile features. When he spoke, the right corner of his mouth twitched slightly and his left eye narrowed at the same time. He was a year or two older than I and apparently stronger. While the stolen goose was roasting on a spit, spreading a tantalising odour, we lay in the grass.

"Want a smoke?" the stranger said.

"I don't smoke."

"Did you sleep in the woods? It's cold," he added without waiting for a reply. "How did you get here? From over there?" He waved his hand in the direction of the railway line.

"Yes, I ran away from the train when it stopped."

"Checking documents?"

"Documents — no. Bandits attacked the train."

"A-ah..." He puffed at his cigarette in silence.

"Where are you heading for?" he suddenly asked after a long pause.

"The Don..." I began, then fell silent.

"The Don?" he queried, sitting up. "You're making for the Don?"

An incredulous smile flitted across his thin cracked lips. His narrowed eyes widened, but instantly faded and his face went cool again.

"Have you got relatives there, or what?" he asked off-handedly.

"Yes, relatives," I answered cautiously, sensing that he was trying to sound me out while remaining in the shadow himself.

He fell silent again. He turned the goose on its other side, from which drops of sizzling fat were dripping, and said calmly:

"I'm going that way too, but not to relatives. I'm going to join Sivers's detachment."

He told me that he had been studying at Penza and had come to visit an uncle, a schoolteacher, who lived in the country nearby, but the kulaks there had raised a revolt and he had barely managed to escape.

The burnt goose, smelling of smoke, had been torn to pieces and we fell to work upon it with gusto, the while we sat chatting in a friendly way.

I was happy to have found a companion. It put new heart into me, and I felt that the two of us now would have no difficulty in getting out of the trap we had both fallen into.

"Let's have a nap while the sun's up," my new companion suggested. "At least we'll have a good sleep. It's too cold in the night."

We lay down in a clearing and soon I began to doze. I would probably have fallen asleep but for an ant, which crawled up my nose. I sat up and gave a snort. My companion was fast asleep. His tunic was open at the throat and on the canvas lining of his collar I read the letters "Ct. A. C. C." stamped in black ink.

"What school is that?" I wondered. "I have the letters 'A. T. H. S.' on the buckle of my belt, standing for 'Arzamas Technical High School'. But here he has 'Ct.' then 'A. C. C.'." I figured it this way and that, but couldn't make it out. "I'll ask him when he wakes up." I decided.

I felt thirsty after the rich food. There was no water nearby, and I decided to descend to the bottom of the ravine, where, according to my conjecture, there should be a brook. I found the brook, but the bank was too slippery to get to it. I went down in search of a drier spot. At the bottom of the ravine a narrow cart-track ran parallel with the stream. In the damp clay I saw the imprint of horses' hooves and fresh horse dung. It looked as if a horse-herd had been driven that way only that morning.

Bending down to pick up the little stick I had dropped, I saw a small shining object trampled into the mud of the roadway. I picked it up and

wiped it. It was a tin badge in the form of a red star, one of those crudely made badges that glowed on the fur hats of the Red Army men, on the blouses of the workers and Bolsheviks in the year 'eighteen.

"What's it doing here?" I wondered, carefully surveying the road. I bent down again to pick up an empty cartridge-case.

Forgetting my thirst, I rushed back to my companion. Instead of being asleep, he was standing next to a bush, looking around, evidently searching for me.

"Reds!" I shouted at the top of my voice as I ran up to him.

He ducked and sprang aside as if a shot had rung out behind him. The face that he turned to me was distorted with fear.

Seeing that it was only me, he straightened up and said crossly, as if to explain his fright:

"Yelling like mad, right into my ear..."

"The Reds," I repeated proudly.

"Where?"

"They passed this morning. Hoof tracks all down the road, the dung's quite fresh. A cartridge-case, and this..." I showed him the star.

My companion drew a breath of relief.

"Why didn't you say so?" And added again, as if excusing himself: "The way you yelled... I didn't know what to think."

"Come on, quick. Let's go along that road. We'll get to the first village, maybe they're still there, resting. Hurry up, make up your mind."

"Come on," he agreed, not, as it seemed to me, without some hesitation. "Yes, of course, let's go."

He passed a hand across his neck and again I had a glimpse of the letters "Ct. A.C.C." on the lining of his collar.

"I say, what do those letters stand for?" I asked him.

"What letters?" he said, annoyed, as he hooked up his tunic.

"Those on the collar."

"God knows. It's not my suit. I bought it secondhand."

"A-ah... I'd never say you'd bought it secondhand," I said cheerfully, stepping out at his side. "It's a perfect fit. My mother once bought me a pair of trousers secondhand, but no matter how I hitched them up they always kept slipping down."

The nearer we got to the village the more often did my companion stop.

"There's no hurry," he said. "It'll be more convenient to approach it

in the evening, at dusk. If the detachment's not there, no one will notice us. We'll just pass through by way of the back yards, that's all. It's dangerous for a stranger nowadays in unfamiliar places."

I agreed with him that it would be safer to take the lay of the land at dusk, but I was so eager to join our people that I couldn't help quickening my pace.

Just short of the village my companion stopped in a hollow overgrown with bushes, and suggested turning off the road and discussing what to do next. In the underbrush he said to me:

"There's no sense in both of us sticking our necks out. I suggest that one of us stays here, while the other goes into the village by the back gardens and takes a look round. I've got my doubts. It's much too quiet and the dogs are not barking. Maybe there are no Reds there at all, only kulaks, blast them, with rifles."

"I tell you what, let's go together."

"Don't be silly," he said, patting me on the shoulder in a friendly way. "You stay here, I'll manage this by myself. Why should you run unnecessary risks? You wait for me here."

"A good chap," I thought, when he had gone. "Rather odd, but a good chap. Another would have shifted a dangerous job to someone else's shoulders or proposed a toss-up, but he volunteered himself."

He came back within an hour — earlier than I thought. He carried a thick heavy stick, which he had evidently just cut and peeled.

"You're back soon!" I shouted. "Well?"

"Nobody there," he answered from afar, shaking his head. "No sign of 'em. The Reds must have taken a different road, the one leading to Suglinki probably, not far from here."

"Are you sure?" I queried in a sinking voice. "D'you mean to say no one's there?"

"Not a soul. An old woman in one of the outlying huts told me, and a boy I ran into in the back gardens confirmed it. Looks like we'll have to spend the night here, my boy, and get on their trail in the morning."

I lowered myself onto the grass and grew thoughtful. I began to have my first doubts as to the truthfulness of my companion's report. Another thing that worried me was his stick. It was a heavy oaken club with a knob carved out on the tip. Evidently he had just cut it. It was about an hour's walk from here to the village. If you made your way there

stealthily, questioning people, it would take you all of two hours to make it, but he had been gone an hour at the most and managed to cut and carve an oaken club while he was at it. Working at it with a penknife would take half an hour at least. Could it be that he had lost his nerve and sat it out in the bushes without trying to find anything out? But that couldn't be. Hadn't he volunteered to go and find out himself? Besides, he didn't look a coward. It was frightening, of course, but then he had to get out of it himself, too, somehow.

We gathered a heap of dry leaves and lay down side by side, covering ourselves with my coat. We lay like that for about half an hour in silence. I began to feel the chill of the damp earth in my side. "Must get some more leaves," I said to myself, getting up.

"What's the matter?" my companion said in a sleepy voice. "Why don't you sleep?"

"It's damp. I'll get another armful or two of leaves."

As we had gathered all the leaves around us, I went to the bushes closer to the road. The moon was only just emerging and it was difficult to make things out in the darkness. Twigs and branches kept getting in the way. A faint rumbling came from the road. Dropping the leaves and trying not to tread on the twigs, I crept towards the road.

A peasant cart was moving slowly and almost noiselessly down the soft damp earth track. Two men were speaking in low voices.

"It all depends," one of them was saying. "If you ask me, I think he was right."

"You mean what the commander said?" the other asked. "I daresay he was. The trouble is they don't stay. Today they come and have a talk with you, and tomorrow they move on. And then the bosses'll come along and they'll say to me, for instance: 'Oh, you this, that and the other, so that's your little game — narking on the kulaks, eh? Give him the works!' It's all right for the Reds, they've stayed a bit, and today they're getting the carts out while we always have our kulaks with us. That'll make you scratch the back of your head all right!"

"Getting the carts out, you say?"

"Sure. Fyodor, one o' their soldiers, knocked us up late this evening to tell us to have a cart ready by twelve."

The voices died away. I stood there not knowing what to think. It was true then — the Reds had been in the village after all. My companion

had deceived me, then. The Reds were leaving. Try and find them again after that. We had to hurry. But what made him deceive me?

My first impulse was to run down the road alone and make for the village. But I remembered having left my coat in the clearing. "I must go back, there's plenty of time. I must tell him, though the fellow's a coward, he is one of us."

A rustling sound made me look round. My companion was coming out of the bushes. Evidently, he had followed me, and he too had overheard the conversation between the two peasants while hiding in the bushes.

"How could you..." I began accusingly.

"Come along!" he said excitedly by way of reply.

I stepped towards the road with him following me.

A heavy blow of the club knocked me down. It was a stunning blow, even though cushioned by my fur cap. I opened my eyes. Squatting on his haunches, my companion, in the light of the moon, was hastily examining the identity paper which he had pulled out of my trouser pocket.

"So that's what he was after," it dawned on me. "It wasn't cowardice at all. He knew the Reds were in the village and he purposely didn't tell me so as to spend the night together and rob me. He's not even a rebel, because he's afraid of the kulaks himself — he's a real White."

I made an attempt to get up and crawl away into the bushes. The stranger noticed this. He thrust the document into his leather case and went up to me.

"Still alive?" he said coldly. "Found yourself a comrade, eh, you tyke? I'm running away to the Don, but not to that goddam Sivers of yours — I'm going to join General Krasnov."

He was standing within two paces of me, swinging the heavy club.

My heart thumped. It hammered persistently against something hard and firm. I was lying on my side and my right hand was on my chest. Carefully, almost involuntarily, my fingers crept under my jacket towards the secret pocket where my Mauser lay.

Even if the stranger had noticed the movement he would not have paid any attention to it, as he knew nothing about the Mauser. I gripped the warm handle and quietly released the safety catch. Meanwhile my enemy had stepped back two or three paces either to get a better look at me or, what is more likely, to give himself more elbow room with the club. Tightening my quivering lips and straightening my benumbed arm,

I drew the pistol and levelled it at the crouching man.

I saw his distorted face and heard his shout as he hurled himself upon me, and my finger mechanically pulled the trigger...

He lay within two paces of me, his clenched fists stretched in my direction. The club lay at his side.

"I've killed him," the thought shot through my dazed mind as I dropped my head in the grass.

I lay there for a long time, stunned and semi-conscious. I suddenly felt cold, and the blood draining from my face, my teeth began to chatter. I sat up and looked at the hands stretched towards me. It was terrifying. This was real! Everything that had happened in my life until then had been merely a game really, even my running away from home, even my training with the splendid fighting squad of the Sormovo workingmen, even yesterday's wandering about the woods. Terror seized me, a fifteen-year-old boy, alone in this black forest with the body of a man whom I had killed outright. The buzzing in my ears stopped and a cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

Spurred on by terror, I got up, crept on tiptoes towards the body, snatched the leather case containing my identity paper, and backed away towards the bushes, keeping an eye all the time on the prostrate body. Then I turned and ran for it, straight through the bushes onto the road, making for the village where there were people. Anything but to remain here alone.

CHAPTER THREE

At the first cottage a voice called out:

"Where the devil are you rushing? Hi, young scrub! Stop, you chump!"

The figure of a man with a rifle came out of the shadow of the cottage and went up to me.

"Where are you running to? Where d'you come from?" the sentry demanded, turning me round to face the moonlight.

"To you," I answered, panting. "You're comrades, aren't you — "

"We're comrades all right," he interrupted, "but who are you?"

"So am I — " I began jerkily. Unable to recover my breath, I handed him my case without a word.

"You are, eh?" the sentry queried in a more cheerful though still suspicious tone. "In that case, let's go and see the commander."

Despite the late hour the village was still awake. Horses were neighing. Gates creaked open to let peasant carts through, and someone yelled nearby:

"Dokukin! Do-ku-kin! Where the devil has he gone to?"

"What are you yelling about, Vaska?" my escort demanded as he drew level with the shouter.

"I'm looking for Mishka," the latter answered angrily. "We've been given sugar for two, and the boys say he's being sent ahead with the patrol."

"He'll give it you tomorrow."

"Like fun he will! He'll eat it all up with his tea in the morning, the sweet-tooth!"

At this point the speaker saw me and immediately changed his tone, asking with curiosity:

"Who have you nabbed there, Chubuk? Taking him down to headquarters? Go ahead. They'll show him there what's what. Ugh, you swine," he suddenly swore at me and made a movement as if intending to prod me on with the butt of his rifle.

But my escort pushed him away and growled:

"Get along with you. It's none o' your business. Just like a dog you are, snapping at a man before you know what it's all about!"

Clink, clink! Clink, clink! I heard a metallic tinkle from the side. A man in spurs, wearing a black fur hat, a gleaming dragging sabre, and a Mauser in a wooden holster, with a whip slung across his arm, was leading a horse out of a gate.

At his side walked a bugler.

"Assembly," the man said, putting a foot in the stirrup.

"Ta-ta-ra-ta... tata..." the bugle sang out softly. "Ta-ta-ta-ta-a-a..."

"Shebalov," my escort called out. "Wait a minute! I've brought a man here to see you."

"A man?" the other said, his foot still in the stirrup. "Who is he?"

"He say he's one of us. I daresay he's got documents."

"I have no time now," the commander answered, swinging into the saddle. "You're a literate man, Chubuk, check 'em yourself. If he's a friend, let him go wherever he wants to."

"I won't go anywhere," I spoke up, fearing to be left alone again. "I've been running about the woods as it is these last two days. I've come to stay with you."

"With us?" the man in the black fur hat queried. "Maybe we have no need of you at all!"

"You do!" I repeated doggedly. "What am I to do with myself, all alone?"

"True enough! If he's really one of us, what can he do by himself?" my escort inserted. "This is a bad place for taking a stroll on your own these days. Don't beat about the bush, Shebalov, don't keep the man waiting. If he's lying, it's one thing, but if he's one of us, don't keep him on tenterhooks. Get off the horse, you've got plenty o' time."

"Chubuk!" the commander said sternly. "Is that the way to speak to your chief? Am I commander or not? I ask you — am I commander?"

"It's a fact!" Chubuk coolly agreed.

"In that case I'll get off without you telling me."

He sprang to the ground, tossed the bridle rein onto the fence and made for the cottage with a rattle of his sabre.

It was not until we were inside the cottage that I got a proper look at him in the dim light of a wick lamp. He had no beard or moustaches. His thin narrow face was coarse-grained. Thick whitish eyebrows met over the bridge of his nose, and from under them looked out a pair of kindly eyes, which he purposely screwed up, evidently to impart to his face a stern look. From the long time he spent reading my document, in the course of which his lips kept stirring slightly, I gathered that he was not very literate. After reading the document, he handed it to Chubuk, saying doubtfully:

"If it isn't a false document then it must be real. What do you say, Chubuk?"

"Uhu!" the other calmly agreed, filling his curved pipe with tobacco.

"Well, what are you doing here?" the commander asked.

Excitedly I began my story, fearing that they would not believe me. But apparently they did, because when I had finished the commander no longer pursed his eyes and he turned to Chubuk, saying genially:

"Strikes me that if this lad of ours is not lying he must be telling the truth! What do you say, Chubuk?"

"Uhu," the latter coolly observed, knocking the ash out of his pipe against the sole of his boot.

"What are we going to do with him?"

"We'll enrol him in Company One, Sukharev can give him the rifle Pashka used before he was killed," Chubuk suggested.

The commander thought this over, tapping his fingers on the table.

"All right, Chubuk, take him down to Company One and tell Sukharev to give him the rifle that Pashka used before he was killed. Let him have cartridges too — the usual ration. Let him enter this man in the list of our revolutionary detachment."

Chink-chink! Clink-clink! — rattled his sabre, spurs and Mauser. The commander pushed open the door and sauntered down to his horse.

"Come along," Chubuk said to me, and suddenly patted me on the back.

Again the bugle sang out its soft lilting song. The horses snorted louder, the carts creaked still more. I felt as happy as can be as I went, smiling, to meet my new comrades. We walked all night. In the morning we entrained at some wayside station. In the evening a battered engine was hitched to our troop train and we rolled on southward to join the combat units and workers' detachments fighting the Germans, the *Haidamaki** and the Krasnovites,** who had seized the Donbas.

Our detachment bore the proud name of Special Detachment of the Revolutionary Proletariat. There were not many men in it, only about a hundred and fifty. It was an unmounted force with its own mounted scout party of fifteen men under the command of Fedya Sirtsov. The detachment was commanded by Shebalov, a bootmaker, whose fingers had not yet healed from the cuts of the wax-ends and whose hands were still stained with blacking. He was quite a character, our commander. The boys treated him with respect, although they laughed at some of his weaknesses. One of these was his love of outward display. His horse was decorated with red ribbons, his spurs (which he must have dug up in some museum) were extraordinarily long-shanked, curved affairs such as I had seen only on pictures of medieval knights; his nickel-plated sabre

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* *Haidamaki* — during the Civil War of 1918-1920, Ukrainian bourgeois-nationalists.— *Ed.*

** Krasnov, Pyotr (1869-1947) — one of the principal initiators of the Civil War in Russia after the Revolution of 1917, a Lieutenant-General. In 1919, emigrated to Germany.— *Ed.*

reached to the ground and the wooden lid of his Mauser had a brass plate fitted into it, bearing the engraved motto: "I'll die, but you'll perish too, you skunk!" He was said to have left a wife and three children at home. The eldest was already working. He deserted from the front after the February revolution and sat stitching boots, and when the cadets started attacking the Kremlin, he put on his Sunday best, some customer's brand-new top-boots just made to order, got himself a rifle from a workers' fighting squad in Arbat, and from then on, as he expressed it, "threw his lot in with the revolution".

CHAPTER FOUR

Three days later, just short of railway station Shakhtnaya, our detachment hastily detrained.

A young cavalryman came galloping up from somewhere or other and handed Shebalov a sealed envelope, saying with a smile, as if communicating good news:

"Yesterday at Krayushkovo the Germans sure mowed our men down. It was pretty hot!"

The detachment was given the task of cutting into the enemy's rear, avoiding the units scattered about the villages, and contacting the detachment of Donets miners under Begichev.

"How am I to contact 'em!" Shebalov said, jabbing at the map with his finger. "Where am I to look for the detachment? They write: 'between Oleshkin and Sosnovka.' You tell me the exact place, it's all very well to say 'contact' and 'between'..."

Shebalov swore at the staff chiefs, who did not understand a blessed thing, and were only good at writing orders, and sent for the company commanders. Though he swore at the "staff crowd", Shebalov was nevertheless pleased at having been assigned an independent mission and not being subordinated to some other more numerous detachment.

There were three company commanders: the clean-shaven cool Czech Galda, the surly N.C.O. Sukharev, and the twenty-three-year-old jovial accordion player and dancer Fedya Sirtsov, a former cowherd.

They all sat round the map in a clearing, hemmed in by a ring of Red Army men.

"Well," Shebalov said, holding up the paper, "according to this order I have received, we've got to get into the enemy's rear to operate near Begichev's detachment, and we've got to march out tonight, giving the enemy units a wide berth and not touching 'em. Is that clear?"

"That's a mouthful — not touching 'em. How can you help it?" Fedya Sirtsov said with cunning naïveté.

"Not touching 'em," Shebalov said, turning his head towards Fedya and showing him his fist. "I know you, you devil. I'll touch you! None of your monkey tricks, now! So we march out tonight," he went on. "No carts, machine-guns and cartridges in packloads — no noise or rattling. If there's any village in our path we bypass it quietly, no going for it like a hungry dog after carrion. This is specially for your benefit, Fedya. If those lazybones of yours see a farmyard they don't care a hang if it's out of the way or not, they make a beeline for it, after the cream."

"So do mine," the Czech Galda confessed. "Last times der scouts dey bring a cask with raw dough. I say to dem: 'Why you bring raw?' and dey say to me: 'We bake it on der fire.'"

Everyone laughed, and even Shebalov smiled.

"That was at Debaltsevo," Vaska Shmakov said, laughing. "It's us he's complaining about. We went reconnoitring, and came on a Cossack — a rich Cossack. Someone in the house started peppering us with rifles, but we got in all the same. The place was empty. The stove was heating and on the table stood a dough-trough. We set fire to the place and took the trough with us. Afterwards, in the evening, we baked the stuff in a campfire. Tasty dough, it was, like a cake."

"You set fire to the farmstead?" I queried. "How can you burn a farmstead?"

"Down to the ground," Vaska answered coolly. "Of course you can, when the owners take pot shots at you. They're a bad lot, those Cossacks. He's a rich chap, he'll build a new house — it'll keep him away from those *Haidamak* bandits."

"What if it only makes him wilder and he'll hate the Reds still more for it?"

"He can't do that," Vaska answered gravely. "The rich ones couldn't hate us more if they wanted to. Petka Kokshin, one of our boys, fell into their hands, and they flogged him for three days before they killed him. And you talk about hating us more!"

Before the night march the boys cooked porridge with pork fat in billycans, baked potatoes in the hot ashes, lolled about in the grass, cleaned their rifles and relaxed. In company commander Sukharev's cart I saw an old greatcoat. The skirt had holes burnt in it, but the coat was still wearable. I asked Sukharev to let me have it.

"What d'you want it for?" he said roughly. "You've got a good cloth coat of your own. I need this greatcoat myself. I'll make a pair of trousers out of it."

"Make it out of mine," I suggested, "no, really. All the boys are wearing army khaki coats, and I'm wearing a black coat, like a crow."

"You don't say!" Sukharev looked at me in surprise. His coarse peasant face expanded into an incredulous grin. "You really want to swop? To be sure," he added quickly, "whoever heard of a soldier in an overcoat? Looks like nothing on earth. Never mind the greatcoat being burnt a bit, you can have it shortened. I'll throw in a grey fur hat into the bargain — I've got an extra one."

We made the exchange, both pleased with the bargain. When I walked away, uniformed like a real Red Army man, with my rifle slung over my shoulder, I heard him say to Vaska, who had just come up:

"I'll send it home to the missus when I get a chance. What does he want it for? If he gets hit the whole coat will be ruined. Won't the missus be pleased!"

In the night Fedya Sirtsov secured two guides at the first farmstead we passed. Two in order to be sure that the detachment would not take the wrong road leading to the enemy. The guides were separated, and when, at the crossroads, one of them said we had to turn left, we asked the other one, and only when their directions coincided did we follow that path.

At first we walked in pairs through the forest, colliding every minute with those in front. Fedya Sirtsov had given orders beforehand for the horses' hooves to be wrapped in footcloths. At daybreak we turned off the road and came out onto a clearing, where we decided to rest, as it was dangerous to go any farther in daylight. We left a listening post near the road, among the raspberry thickets. Towards noon a west wind wafted up the heavy rumble of an artillery duel.

Shebalov went past with a preoccupied air. Fedya walked at his side with a firm springy step, talking quickly. They stopped next to Sukharev.

Their words reached me:

"Reconnoitre the ravine."

"Mounted?"

"No, too noticeable. Send three scouts out, Sukharev."

"You'll take charge, Chubuk," the commander said half-questioningly. "Take Shmakov and choose another reliable man."

"Take me, Chubuk," I said quietly. "I'll be very reliable."

"Take Simka Gorshkov," Sukharev suggested.

"Me, Chubuk," I whispered again, "take me. I'll be the most reliable."

"Uhu," Chubuk said with a nod.

I jumped up and all but squealed, because I did not believe myself that they would take me for such a serious job. I fastened on my cartridge pouch and slung my rifle on my shoulder, but stopped, put out by Sukharev's sceptical look.

"What are you taking him for?" he said to Chubuk. "He's likely to gum up the works for you. Take Simka."

"Simka?" Chubuk queried musingly, striking a match and lighting up.

"Idiot!" I said to myself, my face turning white with mortification and hatred of Sukharev. "How can he say such things of me in front of others? If they don't take me, I'll go out on my own on purpose. I'll go right into the village, find out everything and come back again. Sukharev can go and bury himself then!"

Chubuk shot open the bolt, slipped four cartridges into the magazine, put the fifth in firing position and turned the safety lock. Indifferently, little knowing how important his decision was for me, he said:

"Simka? Well, I don't mind." He adjusted his bandolier, then, glancing at my white face, he suddenly smiled and said somewhat roughly: "Oh, I don't know about Simka. This one'll do, he means business. Come along, lad!"

I made a dash for the edge of the wood.

"Stop!" Chubuk checked me sternly. "None o' your colting now. This is no picnic. Have you got a grenade? You haven't? Take one of mine. Don't stick it in your pocket handle down, the ring will slip off when you pull it out. Keep the primer down. That's right. Ugh, you eager beaver!" he added more kindly.

CHAPTER FIVE

"You take the right slope," Chubuk commanded. "Shmakov will take the left, and I'll go down the bottom, in the middle. Soon as you spot anything, give me the sign."

We moved forward slowly. Within half an hour I saw Shmakov on the brow of the left slope slightly behind me. He walked in a crouching attitude, his head thrust forward. His usually good-natured roguish face was now grave and hard.

There was a bend in the ravine and I lost sight of both Shmakov and Chubuk. I knew they were there somewhere, close by, moving forward like I was, screened by the bushes. The realisation that despite our seeming isolatedness we were strongly linked together by our common task and common danger gave me courage. The ravine widened. The thickets grew denser. Another bend, and I dropped flat onto the ground.

A large cavalry detachment was moving down a wide stone-paved road that ran parallel with the right slope at a distance of a mere hundred paces or so.

The black sleek horses stepped out briskly under their riders; three or four officers rode at the head. Just opposite me the detachment halted, and the commander got out a map and studied it.

I backed away and crawled down, looking round for Chubuk in order to give him the prearranged signal.

Though my heart was in my mouth the thought flashed through my mind that I hadn't gone out reconnoitring for nothing and that I was the first to have spotted the enemy.

"But where's Chubuk?" I thought with alarm, looking round me hastily. I was about to scramble down to the bottom to look for him when my attention was drawn to a bush on the left slope of the ravine which stirred slightly.

Vaska Shmakov, looking out cautiously from behind the bush on the opposite slope, made warning motions to me with his hand and pointed to the bottom of the ravine.

At first I thought he was ordering me to go down, but following the direction in which he pointed I gasped and drew my head in.

A White soldier was walking along the densely overgrown bed of the ravine, leading a horse. Whether he was looking for a watering-place,

or whether he was one of the mounted flank patrol guarding the movement of the column, he was an enemy who had penetrated our lines. I did not know what to do. The horseman disappeared behind the bushes. I could only see Vaska now. But Vaska, on the other side, must have seen something else that was hidden from my sight.

He stood on one knee with the butt of his rifle resting on the ground and one arm stretched out towards me warning me not to move, while he looked down, ready to spring.

A tramping on my right made me look round. The cavalry detachment had turned off onto a cart track and broken into a trot. In the same instant Vaska waved his hand to me with a sweeping gesture and leaping straight over the bush, he dashed down the ravine. I followed suit. Rolling down to the bottom I saw two men struggling, locked in each other's arms, next to the bushes. One of them I identified as Chubuk, the other was the enemy soldier. I don't remember how I got to the spot. Chubuk was underneath, gripping the hand of the White, who was trying to draw his pistol from its holster. Instead of hitting the enemy with the butt of my rifle, I dropped the rifle and started pulling him by the legs. He was heavy, though, and kicked me away. I fell on my back, but caught hold of his hand and bit his finger. The White cried out and jerked his hand away. All of a sudden the bushes parted noisily and Vaska appeared, wet from the waist down. With a practised drill-ground movement he leapt at the soldier and knocked him down.

Chubuk got up from the grass, coughing and spitting.

"Vaska!" he said in a hoarse jerky voice, pointing to the horse who was nibbling the grass.

"Aha," Vaska answered, and picking up the trailing bridle rein, he pulled it towards him.

"Take him along," Chubuk gasped, pointing to the stunned White.

Vaska caught on at once.

"Tie his hands!"

Chubuk picked up my rifle, slashed the strap off with two strokes of the bayonet and pinioned the elbows of the still unconscious soldier.

"Take hold of his feet," he shouted to me. "Wake up, blast you!" he swore, seeing my confusion.

We rolled our captive across the horse's back. Vaska leapt into the

saddle, and without a word, whipped the horse and galloped back down the uneven bed of the ravine.

"This way!" Chubuk wheezed, red and perspiring, pulling my arm. "After me!"

He clambered up the side, clutching at the bushes.

"Stop!" he said, halting near the brow. "Sit down!"

We crouched behind the bushes just in time to see five horsemen below. Evidently this was the main body of the flank patrol. The horsemen stopped and glanced around; they were obviously looking for their comrade. We could hear them cursing loudly. All five snatched their guns from their shoulders. One of them dismounted and picked something up. It was the soldier's cap which we had left behind in the grass in our hurry. The horsemen began speaking in tones of alarm, and one of them, apparently the chief, pointed forward.

"They'll overtake Vaska," I thought. "He's carrying a heavy weight. There are five of them and he's alone."

"Chuck the grenade down!" Chubuk commanded. Something gleamed in his hand and hurtled down.

A dull thud stunned me.

"Chuck it down!" Chubuk shouted, then snatched the grenade from my raised hand, released the safety catch and threw the grenade down the ravine.

"Bloody fool!" he barked at me, utterly dazed as I was by the explosion and the swift succession of unexpected perils. "You pulled off the ring, but left the safety catch on!"

We ran across a newly ploughed muddy vegetable plot. The Whites were evidently unable to make a swift ascent of the slope on horseback on account of the bushes and were chimbing out on foot. We had time to reach another ravine, then raced across a field and plunged into a wood. Far behind us came the cound of rifle shots.

"They must have caught up with Vaska!" I stammered in a voice not like my own.

"No," Chubuk said, listening to the shooting. "Just working off their bad temper. Come on, lad, put your best foot forward! We'll throw them off the trail now."

We went along in silence. It seemed to me that Chubuk was wild with me and despised me for having taken fright and dropped my rifle, for having

bitten the soldier's finger in that ridiculous schoolboy fashion, for having been unable to control my shaking hands when hoisting our prisoner onto the horse's back, and most of all for having lost my nerve to such an extent that I was unable to throw the grenade. More bitter still and shameful was the thought that Chubuk would tell the men in the detachment about me, and Sukharev was bound to remark: "I told you not to take him. You should have taken Simka." Tears of mortification and anger with myself for my cowardice started to my eyes.

Chubuk halted, got out his tobacco pouch and began to fill his pipe with tobacco. I noticed that his fingers, too, were shaking slightly. He inhaled thirstily, as if he were drinking water, then thrust the pouch back into his pocket, patted me on the shoulder and said simply and gaily:

"Narrow escape that was, old chap, eh? You haven't done so badly, Boris! The way you sank your teeth into his hand!" He chuckled at the memory. "Just like a wolf cub. Well, a rifle's not the only weapon you can use in war, old chap. Teeth come in useful too sometimes!"

"But what about the grenade..." I muttered guiltily. "I was going to throw it with the safety catch on."

"The grenade?" Chubuk smiled. "You're not the only one, old chap. Everyone who's not used to it bungles it at first — either he throws it with the safety catch or without the primer altogether. I used to throw it that way myself when I was young. You get all bamboozled, you don't know what you're doing. You just chuck the darned thing like you would a cobblestone. Come along. We've got a long way to go."

We walked the rest of the way to where our detachment stood with a light step and a light heart. I felt like a pupil at after-examination time.

Sukharev would never pass offensive remarks about me again.

On reaching the detachment, Vaska handed over his stunned prisoner to the commander. The White came to himself at daybreak and reported, when interrogated, that the railway line, which we had to cross, was guarded by an armoured train, that a German battalion was posted at the flag station and that a White Guard detachment under Captain Zhikharev was billeted in Glukhovka.

The vivid green foliage smelt of blossoming bird-cherry. The rested boys were cheerful and seemingly carefree. Fedya Sirtsov returned from

reconnaissance with his rollicking cavalrymen and reported that the way in front was clear, and that the peasants in the nearby village stood for the Reds, because only the other day the landowner, who had run away at the beginning of October, had returned to the village and was making a round of the cottages with soldiers, collecting the property from his estate. All those who were found to have estate property in their homes were flogged on the square facing the church more severely than in the days of serfdom, and so the peasants would only be glad if the Reds came.

Washing down a slice of pork fat with hot water in lieu of tea, I joined the crowd of Red Army men huddled round the prisoner.

"Hullo!" Vaska Shmakov greeted me with a friendly shout, drawing his sleeve across his perspiring face after draining a mess-tin of hot water. "You're a fine one, you are."

"What d'you mean?"

"Chucking your rifle away yesterday."

"And who was first to jump down the slope and last to come to the rescue?" I parried.

"I landed right in a bog, old chap, only just managed to pull my legs out. That's why I was late. We were pretty smart, though... When I heard that grenade go off behind me, I thought you and Chubuk were done for. I did, it's a fact. I came galloping in and told the boys: 'Their goose is cooked, I'm afraid.' And I says to myself: 'He didn't want to swap his leather case with me, and now the Whites would get it for nothing!' It's a fine case," he said, touching the flat mapcase slung across my shoulder, which I had taken from the stranger I had killed. "Ah, well, I care a fat lot — you can keep it if you want," he added. "I had a better one than that last month, only I sold it. You needn't be so stuck-up about it!" he wound up with a contemptuous sniff.

I looked at Vaska in surprise. He had such a foolish red face and moved about so clumsily that it was hard to believe that only yesterday he had shown such agility in spying out the Whites and had whipped his horse furiously as he galloped away with his captive bound to his saddle.

The Red Army men bestirred themselves, finishing their breakfast, buttoning up their tunics, rewinding their footwraps. The detachment was preparing to take off.

I was ready, and while waiting for the others, I went to the edge of the wood to have a look at the blossoming bird-cherries.

The sound of footsteps behind me attracted my attention. I saw the captive White, and behind him, three of our men and Chubuk.

"I wonder where they are going?" I thought, looking at the dishevelled gloomy prisoner.

"Stop!" Chubuk commanded, and they all halted.

Glancing again at the White and at Chubuk, I realised what they had brought the prisoner here for. Tearing my feet away with difficulty, I ran back and stopped, clinging to the stem of a birch tree.

A short business-like volley rang out behind me.

"My dear boy," Chubuk said gravely with a faint touch of regret in his voice, "if you think that war is a sort of game or a stroll through pretty places, you'd better go home. A White's a White, and there's no middle line between us and them. They shoot us, and we're not going to spare them!"

I looked up at him with reddened eyes and said quietly but firmly:

"I shall not go home, Chubuk. It was so unexpected. But I'm a Red and I went to fight myself..." here I faltered and added quietly, sort of apologetically, "to fight for the bright kingdom of socialism."

CHAPTER SIX

Peace between Russia and Germany had long since been concluded, yet the Ukraine and Donbas were still flooded with German troops, who helped the Whites to form detachments. The boisterous spring winds breathed fire and smoke.

Our detachment, like dozens of other partisan units, operated in the enemy's rear practically on its own. In the daytime we lay concealed in the fields or ravines or pitched camp at some remote farmstead; in the night we made raids on small garrisoned railway stations. We lay in ambush along country roads and attacked enemy transports, intercepted military messages and dispersed foraging parties.

But the haste with which we steered clear of large enemy units and the constant striving to avoid a pitched battle struck me at first as being shameful. I had been in the detachment now for six weeks and had not yet taken part in a single real fight. There had been skirmishes, raids on sleepy Whites and stragglers. We had cut any amount of wires, sawn down any

number of telegraph-poles, but had not engaged in any real fight yet.

"That's what we're partisans for," Chubuk explained, quite unembarrassed, when I voiced my surprise at what I considered such unseemly behaviour on the part of our detachment. "You'd like to have it the way they show in pictures — column formation, arms atilt, forward march. See what a brave lot we are! How many machine-guns have we got? One, and with only three belts to it. Zhikharev has four Maxims and two guns. What chance d'you stand against them? We've got to go about it differently. We partisans are like wasps — small but stinging. Ours are hit-and-run tactics. Bravery just for the sake of show is no use to us just now. It isn't bravery, it's simply foolishness!"

I got to know many of my comrades during that time. At night on guard duty, in the evening round the campfire, in the indolent heat of midday under the cherry trees in the honey orchards, I heard a good many stories about the lives of my comrades.

The dour, always sullen-faced Maligin with one eye — the other had been blown out by an explosion in the mine — related of himself:

"I can't say much about my life. All I can say is it was pretty tough. My life during the last twenty years could be divided into three equal parts. You got up at six, your nob splitting from the day before, put on your pit clothes, received your lamp and went inbye. You drilled holes for shot-firing and blasted away. You blasted and blasted till you were deafened and dazed, then you made for the shaft to go outbye. You were whisked to the top like a devil, all wet and black. That was part one of my life. Then you went to the wine-shop and got yourself a bottle — they didn't ask for any money, the office paid for that. And then you went to the mine shop, showed them the bottle there, and they'd give you without a word two pickled cucumbers, a loaf and a herring. That was the snack you were entitled to on the bottle. Tuck in — the office would deduct it from your pay. That was part two of my life. The third was going to bed and sleeping. I slept like a log. Enjoyed it even more than the vodka. I liked it on account of the dreams. I don't know what dreams are to this day. You see funny things in a dream. Can't make it out. For instance, once I dreamt that the mine foreman sent for me and says: 'Go to the office, Maligin, you're fired.' 'What for, sir?' I says to him. 'You're fired, Maligin,' he says, 'because you're planning to marry the director's daughter.' 'Who, me?' I says. 'Bless your heart, sir, whoever heard of a shot-firer marrying

a director's daughter? Why,' I says, 'not even a common girl would marry me, a man with one eye knocked out.' Then everything got mixed up. The foreman turned out to be no foreman, but the director's stallion, hitched to their carriage. The director himself steps out o' that carriage, bows to me politely and says: 'I says, shot-firer Maligin, take my daughter for your wife with a dowry of ten thousand together with the foreman — I mean, the stallion and the carriage.' I was struck all of a heap, dazed with joy, and was about to go up when the director started hitting me with his walking stick and the foreman trampled on me with his hooves and neighed, 'Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Just look at him!' And he trampled and trampled on me. So viciously that I cried out in my sleep, waking the whole bunk-house. Someone jabbed me in the ribs and swore at me for not letting people get any sleep."

"Some dream!" laughed Fedya Sirtsov. "I bet you stared too hard at the young lady, that's why you dreamt about her. It always happens with me — if I think of anything before going to sleep I'm bound to dream about it. Take those boots on the dead German that I missed taking off the other day. A fine pair of boots, they were. I dream of them every night now!"

"Boots! You're a boot yourself," Maligin said testily. "I saw the man's daughter only once a year before that. I was lying drunk in a ditch. She and her mother were walking down the path by the kitchen gardens, their horses following alongside. The mother, a posh lady, grey-haired, you know — she comes up to me and says: 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Where's your human dignity? Think of God.' 'Sorry, Ma'am,' I says, 'I have no human dignity, that's why I drink.'

"Her Ma took pity on me. She pushed a ten-kopek piece into my hand and says: 'My dear muzhik, just look, Nature all round is rejoicing, the sun's shining, the birds are singing, and you go and get drunk. Buy yourself some soda water to sober you.' This made me wild. 'I'm not a muzhik,' I says, 'I'm a worker at your mines. Nature can rejoice as much as she damn well likes, but I've got nothing to rejoice at. As for soda water, I never drank it in my life, and if you want to do a kind deed, add another ten-kopek piece for a half-bottle and I'll cool my coppers to mark this agreeable meeting.' 'Boor,' the noble lady then says to me, 'boor! I'll tell my husband tomorrow to dismiss you from here, from the mines.' She and her daughter got into the carriage and drove off. That's the

only talk I had with her. As for the daughter, she stood with her head turned away while we were talking. And you say I stared at her!"

"Dreams — nothing!" Fedya Sirtsov said with a grin. "Want me to tell you a real story about me and a countess? It was this incident, one might say, that started me revolutionising. If you was to hear this story you wouldn't believe your ears."

Fedya tossed his mop of hair and screwed up his eyes ecstatically, like a cat coming out of the larder.

"More yarns, Fedya?" Vaska Shmakov asked with curiosity and disbelief, moving up closer.

"You can believe me or not — that's your business. I'm not going to produce any documents to prove it."

Fedya stretched himself, shook his head as if debating with himself whether to tell the story or not, then clucked his tongue with an air of decision and started off.

"It happened three years ago. I was a good looker, I needn't tell you, better even than I am now. Things worked out so that I was obliged to take a job as herdsboy at the Count's estate. Our Count had a wife, Emilia her name was, and a governess named Anna — Jeannette, they called her.

"Well, one day I was sitting near the herd by the pond, when I saw the two coming along under sunshades. The Countess had a white sunshade and Jeannette a red one. That Jeannette looked like a dried herring — skinny, with spectacles on her nose, and when she walked through the village she'd cover her nose with a handkerchief, because the smell of dung gave her a headache. I must tell you, I had a bull in my herd — a real Simmenthal, a huge prize bull. When that bull o' mine saw that red sunshade he made a beeline straight for Jeannette. I dashed across his path like mad. The two ladies screamed. The Countess dived into the bushes, but Jeannette lost her head and dived straight into the pond. The Simmenthal went in after her, but instead of throwing away her sunshade the fool-woman covered herself up with it for protection, screaming all the time in German or French, I couldn't make out which. I plunged into the water, tore the sunshade out of her hands and hit the bull on the nose with it. He went for me then like mad. I swam out into the middle and threw the sunshade away, then I struck out for the opposite bank and dived into the bushes. By this time the herdsmen had come running up; there was a racket

and yelling, they rounded up the bull, and pulled Jeannette out of the ooze. On the bank she went into a faint."

Fedya breathed hard as if he had just escaped from the bull. He clucked his tongue, preparatory to continuing the story, but just then someone shouted out from the farmhouse porch:

"Fedya... Sirtsov! The commander wants to see you."

"In a minute," Fedya said, waving his hand with annoyance. Then, smiling, he went on: "While they were bringing Jeannette round, Countess Emilia comes up to me, white as a sheet, tears in her eyes, chest heaving. 'Young man,' she says, 'who are you?' 'I'm a herdsboy, Your Excellency,' I says, 'my name is Sirtsov, Fyodor Sirtsov.' So then the Countess sighs and says to me: 'Theodore,' she says — that's their name for Fyodor — 'Theodore, come up to me closer.'"

What the Countess told Fedya, and what it had to do with him afterwards joining the Reds I was not to learn until another time, because there came a clink of spurs and an angry Shebalov cropped up behind me.

"Fyodor," he said sternly, stopping and leaning on his sabre, "didn't you hear me call for you?"

"I did," Fedya grunted, getting up. "What is it now?"

"What d'you mean 'what is it now'? Don't you have to go when your commander sends for you?"

"Yes sir. What does your highness want?" Fedya came back mockingly.

This retort stung Shebalov to the quick, easy-going and mild-tempered though he usually was.

"I'm not your highness," he said in a grave pained tone. "You don't have to 'sir' me, but I'm the commander of this detachment and I've got to demand obedience. Peasants from Temlukov hamlet have just been here."

"So what?" Fedya's black eyes darted shiftily.

"They complained. They said: 'Your scouts came along. We were glad, of course — our own people, comrades. The man in charge, a darkish fellow, called a meeting and spoke up for the Soviet power, talked about the land and the landowners. But while we were listening and passing a resolution his boys started rummaging about in our cellars looking for cream and catching fowls.' What is this, Fyodor? Maybe you've made a mistake in coming to us instead of the Whites? They practise this sort of thing, but we can't have it in our detachment — it's a disgrace!"

Fedya maintained a contemptuous silence as, eyes lowered, he tapped the toe of his boot with his whip.

"I'm telling you for the last time, Fyodor," Shebalov continued, toying with his red sword knot, "I'm no highness to you, I'm a bootmaker and a simple man, but so long as I've been appointed commander here I demand obedience from you. And I warn you now in front of everybody that if this goes on I'll send you to the right-about, good soldier and a comrade though you are."

Fedya eyed Shebalov defiantly, and glanced at the faces of the Red Army men standing around them. Finding no support there other than three or four cavalrymen who smiled to him encouragingly, this put his back up still more and he answered Shebalov with ill-concealed resentment:

"Be careful what you're doing, Shebalov. Good men are not so easy to come by these days."

"I'll drive you out," Shebalov said quietly, and lowering his head, he made his way slowly to the porch.

The incident left me with an unpleasant aftertaste. I knew that Shebalov was right, yet I was on Fedya's side. "Why not just tell the man without using threats?" I thought.

Fedya was one of our best men, always gay and full of life. Whenever there was a need to find things out, to make a sudden raid on a foraging party or to creep up to a landowner's estate that was being guarded by Whites, it was always Fedya who found a convenient road and stole up to the place by way of winding ravines and backyards.

Fedya liked to creep up quietly without a sound of hooves, clink of spurs or a neigh. He would not think twice about punching a horse's nose to quieten it, or using a whip on the riders' backs to stop their whisperings. Fedya's horses were trained not to neigh, and their riders, rooted in their saddles, not to whisper; Fedya himself at the head of the scout party, slightly hunched over the shaggy mane of his pacer, resembled a predatory pangolin wriggling towards a fat fly entangled in the grass.

But when the enemy guard did get wind of him and raised a panicky alarm, the taut little detachment, with whoops and yells, with the crackle of rifle shots and the crash of scattered bombs, would strike swiftly before the Whites, taken by surprise, had time to pull on their trousers or the sleepy-eyed machine-gunner could fix the belt. That is when

Fedya loved a din and racket. What if the bullets, fired from the saddle of a galloping horse, missed their aim, what if a bomb, thrown at random into the grass, sent the terrified hens and fat ganders flying almost to the chimneypots, so long as there was plenty of noise and panic. The thing was to make the stunned enemy believe that a countless force of Reds had torn into the village. The thing was to make fingers fumbling with cartridge clips tremble, to make the machine-gun, rolled out hastily, choke with a twisted belt-feed, and to make the soldiers dash out of the houses, dazed and half-asleep, dropping their rifles and yelling wildly, gibberish with terror: "The Reds! We're surrounded!"

And then, bombs back under belts, rifles slung across backs, Fedya's scouts, flushed with success, would start work silently with cold razor-edged sword blades. That was what our Fedya Sirtsov was like. "Fancy driving a man like that out of our detachment over some wretched fowls and cream!" I thought.

I was still thinking of the quarrel between Fedya and Shebalov, when Chubuk, occupying an observer's post on the roof, shouted down that a large enemy foot force was coming down the road towards the farm. The Red Army men started dashing about in a feverish bustle. No commander, it seemed, could succeed in putting this excited mass in order. No one waited for commands, and everyone knew beforehand what he had to do. One at a time, checking the cartridges in their magazines as they ran, chewing the last of their interrupted breakfast, the men of Galda's First Company ran, bending low, to the edge of the hamlet and dropped down onto the ground, forming an extended line. The scouts tightened the saddle girth and bridled their horses, and untied the hobbles, sometimes slashing them off with a stroke of the sword. The machine-gunners dragged their Colt and belts off the cart. Sukharev, red and perspiring, ran to the edge of the wood, followed by the men of Company Two. After a minute or two everything was quiet. Shebalov came down the steps, issuing some order or other to Fedya. Fedya nodded an "all right, it'll be done". The shutters closed with a bang and the farmer with his womenfolk and children went down into the cellar.

"Stop," Shebalov said to me. "You stay here. Get onto the roof with Chubuk. Report to me on the edge of the wood whatever he sees from

there. And tell him to keep an eye on the Khamur road on the right as well, in case there's anything there."

One, two, clink, clink... A duck, lazily basking in the sun, quacked; a flame-coloured cock, its tail smeared with wheel-grease, crowed triumphantly from the fence. When it fell silent, flopping into the dusty weeds with a heavy beat of wings, everything became quiet at the farm, so quiet that one could now hear, floating out of the stillness, the trill of the sunny lark and the monotonous drone of the bees, gathering drops of warm sweet-scented honey from the flowers.

"What's the matter?" Chubuk said without turning round, when I had climbed up onto the straw-thatched roof.

"Shebalov sent me to help you."

"All right, sit quiet and don't show yourself."

"Keep an eye on the right, Chubuk," I said, passing on Shebalov's order, "in case there's anything on the Khamur road."

"Sit where you are," he answered briefly, and taking his cap off, he thrust his big head out from behind the chimney.

There was no sign of the enemy detachment. It was hidden in a hollow and would reappear at any moment. The straw on the roof was slippery and to keep myself from sliding down I sat without stirring and dug my heels in for a foothold. Chubuk's head almost touched my face, I noticed for the first time that grey streaks were breaking through the black wiry hair. "Can it be that he's an old man?" I wondered.

It struck me as odd for some reason that an elderly man like Chubuk with greying hair and wrinkles round the eyes was sitting here with me on the roof, legs clumsily parted to keep himself from slipping down and his big dishevelled head peeping out from behind the chimney.

"Chubuk!" I whispered.

"What is it?"

"You're getting old already, Chubuk."

"Sap..." Chubuk said, getting angry. "Got a hinge on your tongue?"

Suddenly Chubuk ducked his head and drew back. The detachment was coming up out of the hollow. Chubuk's anxiety communicated itself to me. He began to breathe hard and stirred uneasily.

"Boris, look!"

"I see them."

"Run down and tell Shebalov they've come out of the hollow, but

there's something suspicious about it: at first they were in a march column, but while they were in the hollow they deployed in platoon formation. D'you get me: why should they re-form in platoons? Maybe they've got wind of us being at this farm? Off you go! Get back quickly!"

I pulled my heel out of the straw, tumbled down and dropped onto a fat pig, who darted away with a squeal. I found Shebalov. He was standing behind a tree looking through his field glasses. I gave him Chubuk's message.

"So I see," Shebalov answered in a tone as if I had offended him in some way. "I see myself."

I realised that he was simply irritated at the enemy's unexpected manoeuvre.

"Run back and don't come down; keep a careful eye on the flank, on the Khamur road."

I ran into the empty farmyard and climbed up the dry wattle fence to get up on the roof.

"Soldier-boy!" I heard a whisper.

I turned round, startled, not knowing where the voice came from.

"Soldier-boy!" the voice repeated.

Here I noticed that the cellar door in the yard was ajar and a woman's head peeped out at me. It was the farmer's wife.

"Are they coming?" she whispered.

"Yes," I answered in a whisper.

"Have they got guns or only machine-guns?" the woman asked, hastily crossing herself. "I hope to God they've only got machine-guns, otherwise they'll smash the place to pieces!"

Before I could answer her a shot rang out and an invisible bullet sang its shrill "pi-ing" somewhere high up in the sky.

The woman's head disappeared and the cellar door slammed to. "It's starting," I thought, experiencing a surge of that painful excitement that seizes a man before battle — not when the shooting has started with its angry spatter of machine-gun bursts and the deep chugging of batteries entering the fray, but when nothing yet has happened and the real danger is still to come. "Why is it so quiet," you think, "and so long in coming? I wish it started quickly!"

"Ping!" snarled a second bullet.

But nothing had started yet. Probably the Whites suspected that the

farmstead was occupied by the Reds, but were not quite sure, and had fired two shots at random. So does the commander of a scout party creep up to the enemy's outpost area and open fire in order to ascertain the enemy's strength by the sound of his response, after which he moves to the other flank and opens a running fire to give the enemy the jitters, and then hastens back to his own detachment without having won any battle or inflicted any losses, but with his purpose achieved in that he had made the enemy deploy and reveal his actual strength.

Our detachment, strung out in skirmish line, was silent and did not answer the shots.

Then five cavalrymen on black prancing horses, defying danger, detached themselves from the enemy's ranks and started forward at a smart trot. Three hundred metres short of the farm the horsemen stopped and one of them trained his binoculars on the house. The lenses slid along the edge of the fence and crept upwards to the roof and the chimney, behind which Chubuk and I lay hidden.

"Cunning, they know where to look for an observer," I thought as I hid my head behind Chubuk's back, experiencing the unpleasant sensation that comes over a man in war, when the enemy draws you to his eyes with his binoculars against your will, when a searchlight beam stabs the darkness and snatches out the column in which you are marching, or when a reconnaissance plane circles overhead and you have no means of hiding yourself from its unseen observers.

Your own head then seems to have grown to an enormous size, your arms seem longer, your body clumsy and heavy. You are annoyed that you can't conceal them, can't shrink, curl yourself up into a ball, merge with the straw of the roof or the grass, like a grey ruffled sparrow merging with a heap of brushwood under the stony gaze of a silent hovering vulture.

"They've spotted us!" Chubuk cried. And as if to show that it was no use now playing at hide-and-seek, he came out from behind the chimney and shot the bolt home.

I wanted to climb down and report to Shebalov, but our men on the edge of the wood must have guessed that the ambush had failed and that the Whites would not attack the farm without deploying, because bullets flew after the retreating horsemen from behind the trees.

The deployed platoons of the Whites, strung out in a broken dotted

skirmish line, crept out to the right and left. Before reaching the knoll over which the Whites were scattered, the last of the galloping horsemen dropped into the road together with his horse. When the wind had blown away the cloud of dust, I saw that the horse alone lay in the roadway, while the rider, bent up double, ran limping towards his detachment.

A bullet striking the brickwork of the chimney amid a spatter of plaster dust made us hide our heads. The chimney was a good target. True, we were safe from direct hits behind it, but we were pinned down. If it were not for Shebalov's order that we should watch the Khamur road, we would have climbed down. The desultory shooting developed into a fire fight. The sporadic rifle shots of the Whites died down and the machine-guns started chattering. Under cover of their fire the uneven line moved forward several dozen paces, and lay down again. Then the machine-guns fell silent and the exchange of rifle shots was resumed. Thus, gradually, with a persistence that showed good discipline and training, the Whites moved nearer and nearer.

"Tough devils," Chubuk muttered. "Pushing forward like on a chessboard. They don't look like Zhikharev men. I wonder if they're Germans?"

"Chubuk!" I cried out. "Look at the Khamur road, something's moving there on the edge of the wood."

"Where?"

"No, not there. More to the right. Across that pond there. See it!" I shouted, catching a gleam of something on the edge of the wood, like a sunbeam striking a piece of glass.

A strange sound filled the air, resembling the death rattle of a horse. The rattle turned to a roar. The air rang like a cracked church bell. Something crashed nearby. For a moment it seemed to me as if right here, close at my side, brown lightning burst from a cloud of smoke and black dust, the air shook and the blast, like a wave of warm water, struck me in the back. When I opened my eyes I saw the dry straw roof of the wrecked barn burning with a pale flame that was almost invisible in the sunlight. The second shell landed in the vegetable beds.

"Let's get down," Chubuk said, turning to me an anxious face. "We're in for it. I'm afraid these are no Zhikharevites but Germans. There's a battery on the Khamur road."

The first person I ran into on the edge of the wood was a Red Army man

of short stature nicknamed Polecat.

He was sitting in the grass, ripping open the sleeve of his blood-stained tunic with an Austrian bayonet. His rifle, with open bolt, from under which one could see an unejected cartridge case, lay next to him.

"Germans!" he shouted, without answering our question. "We're making off!"

I gave him my tin cup to draw water in and ran on.

Strictly speaking, Polecat's blood-stained sleeve and his remark about the Germans were the last things I could remember in any order of sequence when looking back upon that first real battle. All the rest I remember quite well, from the moment when Vaska Shmakov came up to me in the ravine and asked me for my cup to have a drink.

"What's that you've got in your hand?" he asked.

I looked and reddened at the sight of a large splinter of grey stone clutched tight in my left hand. How it got there, I don't know.

"Why are you wearing a helmet, Vaska?" I asked him.

"I took it off a German. Let me have a drink."

"I haven't got a cup. I gave it to Polecat."

"Polecat?" Vaska whistled. "You can say goodbye to it then."

"What do you mean? I only lent it to him to get a drink."

"It's the last you'll see of it," Vaska said with a grin, drawing water from the brook in his helmet. "The cup's gone, and Polecat with it."

"Killed?"

"Killed dead," Vaska said, grinning for some unaccountable reason. "Private Polecat has died the death of a Red soldier."

"You're always grinning at things, Vaska!" I said. "Aren't you a bit sorry for Polecat?"

"Who, me?" Vaska sniffed and wiped his wet lips with a soiled hand. "Of course I am. I'm sorry for Polecat, and for Nikishin, and for Sergei, and for myself too. Look what they've done to my arm, damn 'em!"

He twitched his shoulder, and I noticed that his left arm was tied up with a piece of grey cloth.

"A flesh wound, just a scratch," he added. "It burns, though." He sniffed again, and said perkily: "Come to think of it, what should we be sorry for? It's not as if anyone drove us here by force. We knew what we were letting ourselves in for, didn't we? So what's the use being sorry!"

Various moments of the fight were stamped upon my memory, only

I could not piece them together in any coherent sequence. I remember standing on one knee and exchanging shots for a long time with one and the same German, who was within no more than two hundred paces of me. I therefore took hasty aim, afraid that he would shoot before I did, and so I would pull the trigger and missed. He must have had the same feeling, because he too missed.

I remember a shell burst knocking over our machine-gun. It was immediately dragged away to another place.

"Drag the belts over!" Sukharev had shouted. "Lend a hand, damn you!"

I had seized one of the boxes lying in the grass and started lugging it over. Afterwards I remember Shebalov giving me a jab in the shoulder and swearing at me; what for, I couldn't make out at the time.

And then, I believe, a bullet got Nikishin. But no, Nikishin was killed before that, because he dropped when I was still running with the box and he had shouted to me: "You're dragging it the other way! Take it to the machine-gun!"

Fedya had his horse shot down under him.

"Fedya's crying," Chubuk said. "Stuck his head into the grass and blubbering, the crazy man. I went up to him. 'Don't be silly,' I says, 'there isn't time to cry over people.' Fedya whirled round and grabbed hold of his gun. 'Go away,' he says, 'go away before I shoot you.' He had a mad look in his eyes. I walked away. No sense in talking to a crazy man. He's a bad egg, Fedya," Chubuk continued, lighting his pipe. "I don't trust the man."

"What d'you mean, you don't trust him?" I said. "He's as brave as they make 'em."

"So what of it? He's a bad egg all the same. He's disorderly, doesn't recognise the Party men. 'My programme,' he says, 'is fight the Whites till they all peg out, and we'll see what's what when the time comes.' I don't like that programme somehow. It isn't a programme, it's all fog. A wind'll blow and there'll be nothing left of it!"

Ten of our men were killed and fourteen wounded, of whom six died. If we had a proper dressing station with doctors and medicines many of the wounded would have survived.

Instead of a dressing station we had a grass-plot, instead of a doctor a medical orderly from the German war named Kalugin, and the only drug

we had was iodine — a canister full of it. We used iodine unsparingly. I saw Kalugin fill a wooden soup spoon full to the brim with iodine and pour it out onto Lukoyanov's wide lacerated wound.

"Never mind the pain," he reassured the man. "Iodine's good for you. If it wasn't for this iodine you'd go west, that's a fact. As it is, you may pull through."

We had to leave here to join up with our forces in the north, where there was a screen of regular Red Army units. We were running short of cartridges. But we were tied down by our wounded. Five of them could go along with us, but three were in a precarious state, neither dying nor getting better. Among these was Gypsy Kid Yashka. Yashka popped up among us unexpectedly.

One day, when preparing to march out from Arkhipovka hamlet, our detachment lined up for the count along the street. The left-flank man, little Polecat (now killed) sang out: "A hundred and forty-seven!"

Until then Polecat had always been the hundred and forty-sixth. Shebalov roared: "Number again!"

And again Polecat was a hundred and forty-seventh.

"What the hell!" Shebalov cried angrily. "Who's muddling up the count, Sukharev?"

"No one," Chubuk answered from the ranks. "We've got an extra man here."

Indeed, standing in the ranks between Chubuk and Nikishin was a new man. He must have been eighteen or nineteen. A dark young fellow with a curly tousled head.

"What are you doing here?" Shebalov demanded, surprised.

The boy was silent.

"He took his place next to me, I thought you had taken on a new man," Chubuk explained. "He came along with a rifle and stood here."

"Who are you?" Shebalov demanded.

"I'm a ... a gypsy, a Red gypsy," the other answered.

"A re-ed gy-yp-sy?" Shebalov queried, staring at him, then suddenly added with a laugh: "You're not a full-grown gypsy, you're a gypsy kid!"

He stayed with us, and the nickname Gypsy Kid stuck.

Gypsy Kid was now wounded in the chest. His swarthy face was pallid, and he kept muttering rapidly in a strange tongue with parched lips.

"I've been in the army this many a year, and served half through

the German war, but I've never seen a gypsy soldier," said Vaska Shmakov. "I've seen Tatars and Mordvinians, even Chuvashes, but never any gypsies. They're a bad lot, these gypsies, if you ask me. They don't grow corn, they don't go in for any trades, all they're good at is stealing horses, while their women fool honest people. I can't make out what brought him here. Freedom — they've got all the freedom in the world. They don't have to defend their land. What do they want land for? They've got nothing to do with the workers either. What does he stand to gain by getting mixed up in this business? There must be something in it. I wonder what he is up to."

"Maybe he's for the revolution, too, how do you know?"

"Not on your life! I'll never believe that gypsies can be for the revolution. He was beaten in the old days for stealing horses, and he'll be beaten for the same thing all his life!"

"But maybe he won't steal anything after the revolution?"

"Oh, I don't know," Vaska said with a wry smile. "They beat 'em with cudgels in our village and beat 'em with poles, but it did no good. They were at it again. What makes you think the revolution will cure 'em?"

"You' re a fool, Vaska," Chubuk, who had been silent till then, put in. "You don't see a damn thing through that cottage of yours and your horse. According to you, the whole revolution will boil down to your getting a slice of the landowner's estate and some twenty logs from the landowner's woodlot for free. And the chairman of the Soviet will take the place of the village head, while life itself will go on in the old way."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two days later Gypsy Kid felt better. In the evening, when I went up to him, he was lying on a heap of dry leaves, staring up into the black starry sky and humming a tune.

"Gypsy Kid," I said to him, "I'll light a fire next to you and heat up some water. We'll have tea, I've got some milk in my flask. Okay?"

I ran off to fetch some water, hung the mess-tin up on a ramrod laid across the fire between two bayonets stuck into the ground, and moved up to the wounded man.

"What song are you singing, Gypsy Kid?" I asked.

His answer was delayed.

"I am singing an old song which speaks about the gypsies having no homeland of their own, home to them being the land where they were well received. Then it goes on to say: "Tell me, Gypsy, where are you well received?' And he answers: 'I have walked the length and breadth of many lands, I have been with the Hungarians, and with the Bulgarians and in the country of the Turks, but never yet have I found a country where my people were well received.'"

"Gypsy Kid," I said to him, "what made you come to us? Your men are not being called up."

The whites of his eyes gleamed as he raised himself on his elbow and answered:

"I came myself, I don't need to be called up. I am fed up with gypsy camp life. My father knows how to steal horses and my mother tells people's fortunes. My grandfather stole horses and my grandmother told fortunes. And none of them ever stole happiness for themselves, or told their own good fortunes. It did not work."

Gypsy Kid sat up in his excitement, but winced from the pain of his wound and fell back on the heap of leaves with a faint groan.

The milk boiled over and instantly put out the fire before I could snatch the mess-tin off the coals. Gypsy Kid suddenly laughed.

"What are you laughing at?"

He tossed his head with a gay gesture. "I was thinking, all the people were like that. The Russians, the Jews, the Georgians and the Tatars, they all put up with the old life until their patience boiled over and they threw themselves into the fire, like water from a mess-tin. The same with me... I stood it for as long as I could, then I snatched a rifle and went in search of the good life."

"You think you'll find it?"

"Not by myself, I wouldn't ... but all together we ought to, being so keen on it."

Chubuk came up.

"Sit down and have some tea with us," I said.

"No time. Will you come with me, Boris?"

"Yes," I answered quickly, not even asking where he was calling me.

"Then finish your tea quickly. The cart's waiting for us."

"What cart, Chubuk?"

He drew me aside and explained that the detachment was setting out at daybreak to join up with Begichev's detachment of miners not far from here. Together we were to make our way out to join the main forces. We could not take the three badly wounded men with us, as we would have to pass the Whites and the Germans.

Not far from here there was a bee-garden. It was an out-of-the-way place, and the beekeeper, who was friendly disposed towards the Reds, had consented to shelter the wounded men until they recovered. Chubuk had come from there with a horse and cart, and the wounded had to be moved out while it was still dark.

"Anybody else going with us?"

"No. Just we two. I'd manage myself, only the horse is a jibber. One of us'll have to lead it by the bridle while the other looks after the wounded comrades. Will you go?"

"Why, yes, Chubuk. I'll go anywhere with you. Where do we go from there — back here?"

"No. We go straight across the river from there to meet our detachment. Let's be going," Chubuk said, making for the horse's head. "See my rifle doesn't fall out," his voice came through the darkness.

The cart started with a slight jerk, a dewdrop splashed into my face from a bush as the wheels grazed it, and the dying campfires scattered by the detachment in preparation for its departure passed out of sight.

It was a heavy road, full of ruts and mudholes and bumpy with gnarled roots. It was so dark that I could see neither the horse nor Chubuk from the cart. The wounded lay on a litter of fresh straw and were silent.

I walked behind the cart, holding on to the back of it with one free hand — the other being engaged holding the rifle — to keep myself from stumbling. It was quiet. But for the monotonous wailing cry of a lapwing the darkness all around us might have been dead. All were silent, except for an occasional faint moan from Timoshkin, one of the wounded men, whenever the wheels dropped into a hole or bumped over the stump of a tree.

The sparse half-denuded spinney seemed a primeval impenetrable forest to us. The clouded sky hung over the cut-through like a black ceiling. It was stuffy, and we seemed to be groping our way through a long winding corridor.

It reminded me of a similar warm night long ago, three years ago

perhaps, when my father and I were returning home from the railway station by way of a short cut through a copsewood. The same cry of the lapwing, the same smell of overripe mushrooms and wild raspberries.

At the railway station, where he had seen off his brother Pyotr, Father had drunk several wineglasses of vodka. Whether it was that, or the sweet smell of the raspberries, Father was unusually excited and talkative. He told me on the way back about his young days and his studies at the seminary. I laughed at his accounts of his school life and of how they were birched, and it seemed ridiculous and incredible that anyone could birch such a tall strong man as my father was.

"You must have read that somewhere," I said. "There's a book by some author that describes it. *Seminary Sketches* it's called. But that was donkey's years ago!"

"You think I studied not long ago? Years ago."

"You lived in Siberia, Dad. It must be awful there, what with all those convicts. Petka told me they could kill a man there easy as anything and there was no one to complain to."

Father had started laughing and tried to explain something to me. What he was trying to tell me I couldn't understand at the time, because, according to him, it worked out that the convicts were not convicts at all and that even some of his acquaintances were convicts, and that there were lots of good people in Siberia, more than in Arzamas, at any rate.

I had let all this drift past my ears, as I had many other talks, the meaning of which I began to understand only now.

"No, never in all my past life had I ever suspected or thought that my father was a revolutionary. And the fact that I was now with the Reds and carried a rifle on my shoulder was not because my father had been a revolutionary and I his son. It came about of itself. I came to it myself," I thought. And the thought made me feel proud of myself. No, really, look how many parties there were, yet I had chosen the only right one, the only revolutionary party!

I was eager to share this thought with Chubuk. And suddenly it seemed to me that there was no one at the horse's head and the horse had long been hauling the cart at random along an unfamiliar road.

"Chubuk!" I cried, frightened.

"Eh!" I heard his gruff stern voice. "What are you yelling for?"

"Is it a long way off yet, Chubuk?" I said, somewhat confused.

"A good distance," he answered and halted. "Come over here and open your coat, I want to light up."

The pipe swam alongside the horse's head like a firefly. The road smoothened, the wood widened out and we walked side by side.

I told Chubuk what I had been thinking and expected him to commend my intelligence and good judgement, which had led me to throw in my lot with the Bolsheviks. But Chubuk was in no hurry to praise me. He smoked out at least half a pipe before he came out with the grave comment:

"These things happen. A man sometimes will work these things out for himself. Lenin, for instance. I don't know about you, though."

"What do you mean?" I said in a low hurt voice. "I came to it on my own."

"On your own... Of course you did. That's what *you* think. Life turned out that way for you, that's all. For one thing, they killed your father. Secondly, you fell in with such people. Thirdly, you quarrelled with your schoolmates. Fourthly, you were kicked out of school. Leaving out all these events, the rest may have been your own doing. But don't be sore," he added, sensing that he had wounded my feelings. "No one's asking more of you, are they?"

"It works out then that I'm just making believe... That I'm not a Red?" I said in a drooping voice. "It isn't true. Haven't I always gone out with you on reconnaissance, and didn't I go off to the front on my own so's to fight ... and now..."

"Silly ass! Now nothing! I'm telling you — it's just circumstances. Now say, for instance, that you'd been sent to military school — they'd have made a cadet out of you and you'd now be serving with General Kaledin."

"What about yourself?"

"Me?" Chubuk smiled. "I've got twenty years of mine work behind me, my lad. And no cadet school of yours could knock that out of me!"

I felt terribly hurt. Chubuk's words had offended me deeply and I fell silent. But I couldn't keep silent.

"In that case, Chubuk, I've got no business in the detachment, once I could have turned out a cadet, a Kaledinite..."

"Silly ass!" Chubuk answered coolly, seeming not to notice how sore I was. "Who cares what you could have been. It's what you are that counts. I'm just telling you this so's you shouldn't give yourself airs.

With all this said you're not a bad chap. When we get to know you better maybe we'll take you into the Party by and by. Silly kid!" he added in a kindlier tone.

I knew that Chubuk liked me, but did he realise how ardently, more than anyone else in the world at that moment, I loved him? "A good man, Chubuk," I said to myself. "Mind you, he's a Communist, spent twenty years in the mines and his hair's turning grey, yet he's always with me. With me alone. That means I deserve it. And I'll try to deserve it still more. Next time there's a fight, I purposely won't duck my head, and if I'm killed, I don't care. They'll write home to Mother then: 'Your son was a Communist and he died in the great cause of the revolution.' Mother would cry and hang my portrait on the wall next to Father's, and a new happier life would run its normal course past that wall."

"It's a pity, though, that the priests had lied about a person's soul," I thought. "He hasn't got one. But if he had a soul it would be able to see the life that is coming. It looks like being a good life, a very interesting one."

The cart stopped. Chubuk ha tily thrust his pipe into his pocket and said quietly:

"Sounds like something knocking in front of us. Hand me my rifle."

The horses and the cart with the wounded men were taken aside into the bushes. Chubuk disappeared, leaving me with the cart. Presently he returned.

"Not a word now... Four mounted Cossacks. Give me a sack, I'll cover the horse's muzzle in case it neighs."

The clop of hooves drew nearer. Just short of where we stood the Cossacks slowed down to a walking gait. A sliver of moon breaking through a gap in the torn clouds lighted up the roadway. From behind the bushes I saw four fur hats. The Cossacks had an officer with them; I caught the brief gleam of a golden shoulder-strap. We waited until the stamp of hooves had died away and started out again.

Day was breaking by the time we reached the farmstead.

The sleepy-eyed beekeeper came out to the gate at the sound of the cart. He was a lank red-haired peasant with a hollow chest and bony shoulders jutting out sharply from under his unbuttoned cotton shirt. He led the horse across the yard and through a small gate from which ran out a barely perceptible track overgrown with grass.

"We'll go here. There's a threshing-shed in the wood down by the bog, they'll be safer there."

It was cool and quiet in the small shed, which was packed with hay. Sackcloths were spread in the far corner. Two sheepskins, neatly folded, served as pillows. Nearby stood a pail of water and a birchbark can containing kvass.

We carried the wounded men over into the shed.

"Maybe they want something to eat?" the beekeeper said. "Under their heads is bread and pork fat. The missus'll bring some milk when she's milked the cows."

We had to be going if we were not to miss our detachment at the ford. Although we had done everything we could for our wounded comrades, we felt rather awkward, leaving them here all alone in enemy territory.

Timoshkin seemed to realise this.

"Well, goodbye," he said with pallid parched lips. "Thank you, Chubuk, and you, too, lad. Maybe we'll meet again in this life."

Samarin, who was more enfeebled than the others, opened his eyes and gave a friendly nod. Gypsy Kid was silent. Resting on his arms, he looked at us gravely and then gave a wan smile.

"Goodbye to you, fellows," Chubuk said. "Get better quickly. Your host is a reliable man, he won't leave you in the lurch. Keep well."

He turned towards the door, coughed loudly and tapped his pipe out against the butt of his rifle.

"Good luck to you, comrades, I wish you victory!" Gypsy Kid called out in a loud ringing voice. The sound of it made us stop and turn round in the doorway. "I wish you victory over all the Whites in the world," Gypsy Kid added just as clearly and distinctly, and dropped his dark head onto the soft sheepskin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sun-scorched sandy bank melted in the water, which sparkled in the rippling shallows. There was no sign of our detachment at the ford.

"They must have gone on," Chubuk decided. "It doesn't matter. There must be a cordon not far from here, and our detachment will call a halt there."

"What about having a dip, Chubuk?" I suggested. "We'll be quick. Look how lovely and warm the water is."

"This is a bad place for bathing. Too open."

"So what?"

"What d'you mean? A naked man is no soldier. You can take a naked man with a stick. Or a Cossack can come riding down to the ford and take your rifle away. Where will you be then? A thing like that happened once at Khoper. It wasn't just two men, but a whole detachment forty strong, who went bathing. Five Cossacks pounced on 'em and opened fire on the river. Talk about a panic! Some were shot down, others did a bunk to the other side of the river. Wandered about the woods naked. Rich villages round about, mostly kulaks living there. Couldn't show up anywhere. A naked man meant you were a Bolshevik."

Nevertheless I persuaded him. We went aside into the bushes and had a quick dip. We waded across the river with our trousers and boots in a belted bundle hitched to our bayonets. After our bathe the rifle seemed lighter and the cartridge pouch did not press into your side. We stepped out lightly along the edge of a wood towards a derelict-looking hut with smashed window-panes; even the copper from the kitchen had been broken open. Apparently, the owners, before leaving it, had carted away everything they could.

Chubuk, with narrowed eyes, walked guardedly round the house, and putting two fingers into his mouth, gave a piercing whistle. The echo bounced and reverberated for a long time through the woods, gradually dying away in the leafy thickets. There was no response.

"Do'you mean to say we've come before they have? Ah, well, we'll have to wait."

We chose a shady spot a little way back from the road and lay down. It was hot. I made a roll of my coat and put it under my head, and took off my leather case to feel more comfortable. During our marches and night halts, when we slept on the damp ground, the case had become frayed and faded.

The case contained my penknife, a bar of soap, a needle and a ball of thread, and the middle part of Pavlenkov's Russian encyclopedia.

An encyclopedia is a book that one can re-read any number of times. All the same, you can never memorise it all. That is why I carried it

about with me, and often during rest periods or while sitting it out in a ravine or in the depths of a forest, I would get out the book and re-read the dog-eared pages, running through all the entries just as they came along. It gave the biographies of monks, monarchs and generals, prescriptions for making varnishes, philosophical terms, references to wars of olden times, the history of Costa Rica — a state I had never heard of before — followed by a description of how to make fertiliser out of animal bones. I obtained a good deal of miscellaneous information, both useful and useless, from the letter F to the letter R, at which the dictionary broke off.

A few days ago, before going out to take up my post, I had hurriedly thrust a piece of black bread in the case. I noticed now that the forgotten bread had crumbled and some of the pages had stuck together. I shook the contents of the case out on the grass and began to scrape the crumbs off the sides with the flat of my hand. One of my fingers brushed a corner of the leather lining, which had come unstuck.

I turned the case up to the sun and looked inside. A piece of white paper could be seen hidden beneath the lining.

My curiosity aroused, I pulled back some more of the lining and drew out a thin sheaf of papers. I peeled off one of them. In the middle was a gilt emblem of the double-headed eagle and lower down, in gold embossed lettering, the word "Certificate".

The certificate was issued to pupil Yuri Vaald of Company 2 of the Count Arakcheyev Corps of Cadets to the effect that he had successfully completed his course of studies, had displayed excellent diligence and behaviour and was being moved up to the next form.

"So that's what it is!" it dawned on me as I called to mind the stranger I had met and killed in the woods. His black tunic had had all the buttons torn off it deliberately and the letters Ct. A.C.C. stamped on the lining of the collar.

The other paper was a letter, written in French and dated recently. Although school had left me with only a hazy memory of this language, nevertheless after poring over it for half an hour, filling in the gaps of my knowledge with guesses, I gathered that it was a letter of introduction to a Colonel Korenkov on behalf of Cadet Yuri Vaald.

I wanted to show these curious papers to Chubuk, but he was asleep and I didn't like to wake him — he had been on his legs since yesterday

morning. I put the papers back into the case and started reading the dictionary.

About an hour passed. Through the murmur of the wind and the chatter of the birds I caught a faraway alien sound. I got up and put a hand to my ear. The tramp of feet and the sound of voices grew more and more distinct.

"Chubuk!" I said, shaking his shoulder. "Get up, Chubuk, our people are coming!"

"Our people coming!" Chubuk repeated mechanically, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"Yes. They're quite close. Hurry up."

"Fancy me falling asleep!" Chubuk said, surprised. "I just lay down for a minute."

His eyes were still sleepy and squinted against the sun as he slung his rifle on his shoulder and strode after me.

The voices sounded right next to us. I jumped out from behind the hut and threw my hat up into the air, yelling a greeting to our approaching comrades.

I did not see where my hat fell, because the realisation of a terrible mistake stunned me.

"Back!" Chubuk, behind me, cried out in a hoarse snarling voice.

Bang ... bang ... bang...

Three shots rang out almost simultaneously from the front ranks of the column. Some hidden force almost tore the rifle from my hands and splintered the butt with such fury that I was barely able to keep my ground. But the roar and the shock also aroused me from my stupor. "The Whites," it dawned on me, as I ran back to Chubuk. Chubuk fired.

For a full hour we were in danger of being rounded up by the scattered enemy. But we succeeded in giving them the slip. For a long time after the voices of our pursuers had died away we blundered along, wet and flushed. We gulped the moist air of the forest with parched throats, our aching feet clutching at tussocks and stumps with burning soles.

"Enough," Chubuk said, flopping down onto the grass. "Let's have a rest. Whew, that was a narrow escape! My fault. I fell asleep. You started yelling: 'Our people!' I thought you'd made sure of it and I pushed forward, half asleep."

It was then that I looked at my rifle. The stock was shattered to

splinters and the magazine case was mutilated.

I handed the rifle to Chubuk. He looked at it, then threw it away into the grass.

"A stick," he said contemptuously. "It isn't a rifle any more, it's a cudgel to stun pigs with. Never mind. You were lucky not to get hit. Where's your coat? That's gone too, I lost my roll too. So that's how it is, old chap!"

We could do with a good long rest, lying in the grass without stirring, taking off our boots and undoing the collars of our shirts, but far stronger than fatigue were the pangs of thirst. And there was no water anywhere nearby.

We got up and walked on warily. We crossed a field; the little houses of a village nestled under the hillside; the white clay cottages with their straw-thatched roofs looked from here like a clump of brown-capped mushrooms. We did not dare to go down. We crossed the field and found ourselves in a small wood.

"A house," I whispered, stopping and pointing to the edge of a red iron roof.

Fearing an ambush, we cautiously crept up to the tall fence. The gate was locked. No dogs barked, no hens clucked, no cow stamped in the stall — all was quiet, as if all living things had gone in hiding at our approach. We walked round the house, but found no passage to it.

"Climb up on my back," Chubuk said, "and look over the fence."

Over the top of the fence I saw an empty farmyard overgrown with grass and trampled flower-beds on which, here and there, grew a few crushed dahlias and blue starry-eyed pansies.

"Well?" Chubuk asked impatiently. "Get down! What d'you think I'm made of — stone?"

"No one's there," I answered, jumping down. "The front windows are boarded up, and the side one has no window frame at all. You can tell at once it's an abandoned house. There's a well in the yard, though."

We tore aside a loose board and entered the yard through the gap. The deep water in the mildewed hole of the well shone like an ink blot, but there was nothing to draw it with. Under a shed, among a heap of junk, Chubuk found a rusty leaky pail. By the time we pulled it up there was only a little water left at the bottom. We then plugged the hole with some grass and tried again. The water was clear and cold, and we had

to drink it in small gulps. We washed our dusty perspiring faces and walked over to the house. The front windows were boarded up, but the door at the side opening onto a veranda was wide open and swung on a single lower hinge. Stepping carefully over the squeaky floorboards we went inside.

On the floor, littered with straw, scraps of paper and rags, stood several empty cases, a broken chair and a sideboard with doors that had been smashed open with some blunt heavy instrument.

"The peasants have looted the place," Chubuk said in a low voice.

In the next room lay a jumbled heap of dusty books covered with bast matting, among them the torn portrait of a portly gentleman upon whose white lofty brow someone had scribbled an indecent word with a finger dipped in ink.

It was a strange and interesting experience to go from room to room of this abandoned looted house. Every little thing there — a broken flowerpot, a forgotten photograph, a button glinting amid the rubbish, the scattered trampled chess figures, the King of Spades, lost from the pack, lying lonesomely among fragments of a broken Japanese vase — spoke of the occupants of this country house, and of a tranquil past so unlike the disturbed present.

A soft thud came from the next room, and this sound, so unexpected amid the decay and ruin of the deserted house, made us start.

"Who's there?" Chubuk's loud voice shattered the silence. He gripped his rifle.

A big ginger cat came towards us with long stealthy strides. It stopped within two paces of us mewing hungrily and staring at us malevolently with cold green eyes. I wanted to stroke it, but it backed away, then cleared the window-sill at a single bound, leapt out onto the trampled flower-bed and disappeared in the grass.

"I wonder it didn't starve to death."

"Why should it. It eats mice. The place is full of 'em, by the smell of it."

A distant door creaked with a dreary heart-chilling sound, followed by a slow shuffle, as if someone was rubbing the floor with a dry rag. We looked at each other. They were human footsteps.

"Who the devil can that be?" Chubuk said in a low voice, pushing me past the window and soundlessly removing the safety catch on his rifle.

With a little cough and a crackle of paper swept aside by the opening

door, there came into the room a poorly shaved old man in shabby blue pyjamas and slippers worn on his bare feet. He looked at us in surprise but without fear, bowed courteously and said in an impassive tone:

"I was wondering who it was, walking about downstairs. Must be the peasants back again, I thought. But no. I looked out of the window and saw no carts."

"Who are you?" Chubuk asked with curiosity, slinging his rifle back onto his shoulder.

"May I be allowed to ask first — who are you?" the old man countered in the same quiet impassive tone. "If you have deemed it necessary to pay a visit, will you please introduce yourselves to the host. It is not difficult to guess, though," he added, his dusty-grey eyes gliding over Chubuk. "You are Reds."

The man's lower lip drooped as if someone had pulled it down. A gold tooth flashed and faded with a yellow gleam, and the awakened eyelids brushed the dust from his grey eyes. With the sweeping gesture of an hospitable host the old man invited us to follow him: "If you please, gentlemen."

We looked at each other, puzzled, and walked through the devastated room and up a narrow wooden staircase.

"I receive visitors upstairs, now," our host explained apologetically. "It's so untidy downstairs, there's no one to tidy up, everyone has disappeared. This way please."

We found ourselves in a small sunny room. Against the wall stood an old battered sofa with disembowelled entrails, covered with bast matting instead of a sheet, and with the remains of a once handsome carpet with burnt holes all over it, doing duty as a blanket. Next to it stood a three-legged writing table and over it hung a cage with a canary in it. The canary was dead. It must have died a long time ago. It lay in the seed trough, feet upwards. Several dust-covered photographs looked down from the walls. Evidently someone had helped the host to drag the remains of the smashed furniture into this room for him.

"Sit down, please," the old man said, pointing to the sofa. "I live alone, you know, I haven't had visitors for a long time. The peasants come once in a while, bringing food, but I haven't seen any respectable people for a long time. Captain Schwarz visited me once. Do you know him? Oh, excuse me, you are Reds, of course."

Our host went to the sideboard and got out two plates, which had survived the débâcle, and two forks — one a plain kitchen fork with a wooden handle, the other a fancifully bent dessert fork with one prong missing, then got out a loaf of black bread and half a ring of Ukrainian sausage. He placed a kettle, almost black with greasy soot, on a lopsided oil-stove, wiped his hands on a towel that had not been washed for God knows how long, took down from the wall a quaint pipe on which was carved a grinning toothless he-goat with a human head, filled it with tobacco and sat down in a battered armchair with twanging, jutting springs. Throughout these preparations we sat silently on the sofa.

Chubuk nudged me, and smiling slyly, tapped his forehead with a finger when the old man's back was turned. I smiled back at him understandingly.

"It's a long time since I saw any Reds," our host said, and added enquiringly: "How is Lenin's health?"

"He's all right, thanks," Chubuk answered gravely.

"H'm, all right."

The old man poked the mouthpiece of his reeking pipe with a piece of wire and sighed.

"For that matter, why shouldn't he be?" He paused, then, as if answering our question, added: "I'm not in the best of health. Insomnia, you know. I've lost the old mental equilibrium. I get up sometimes and walk through the rooms — everything's so quiet, only the mice scratching."

"What are you writing there?" I asked, seeing a pile of small sheets covered with minute handwriting.

"Oh, just a view of current events," he answered. "I am outlining a plan of world reorganisation. I'm a philosopher, you know, I take a dispassionate view of life as it comes and goes. I do not complain of anything."

The old man got up and stole a glance out of the window, then resumed his seat.

"Life will create a big noise, but truth remains. Yes, truth remains," the old man repeated, slightly warming to his theme. "There have been riots before this. We have had Pugachev and nineteen 'five, when manor houses were demolished and burnt down in the same way. Time passed and the things that were destroyed rose again from the ashes like the phoenix bird, and things that were scattered were gathered together again."

"What do you mean? You're not thinking of turning things back the old way, are you?" Chubuk said rather roughly.

At this blunt question the old man shrank, smiled cringingly and said:

"Goodness, no! I didn't mean that at all. It's what Captain Schwarz wants, not me. He even offered to return to me everything the muzhiks had borrowed from me, but I declined. What good is it to me at a time like this? I'd rather have them help me out a little with food, let them enjoy my property in good health."

At this point the old man got up again, stood by the window, then quickly turned towards the table.

"Well, well... The kettle is boiling, I see. Please come to the table."

We needed no second invitation. The bread crusts crunched on our teeth and the smell of garlicky sausage pleasantly tickled our nostrils.

Our host went into the next room and we could hear him in there opening drawers.

"A funny old boy," I said quietly.

"Funny, yes," Chubuk agreed. "But why does he keep looking out of the window?"

Saying this, Chubuk turned round and passed a quick eye over the room. A piece of old sacking spread in the corner attracted his attention. He frowned and crossed over to the window.

Our host came in. He held a bottle, from which he wiped a film of dust with the hem of his pyjama.

"Here," he said, coming up to the table. "Captain Schwarz did not finish it the last time he was here. Let me give you a little brandy with your tea. I like the stuff myself, but for guests ... for guests..." He pulled out the paper plug with which the neck was corked and filled up our glasses with the contents of the bottle. I reached for my glass, but Chubuk quickly came away from the window and said to me gruffly:

"My dear boy! Can't you see there are not enough glasses to go round? Give your seat up to the old gentleman instead of lolling about. You can have yours later. Sit down, Dad, let's drink together."

I looked at Chubuk, surprised at the rough tone in which he had addressed me.

"No, no!" the old man said, pushing back the glass. "I'll have it afterwards, you're my guests..."

"Drink, Dad," Chubuk repeated and moved the glass up to our host with a resolute gesture.

"No, no, don't bother," the old man repeated doggedly, moving the glass away awkwardly and upsetting it.

I resumed my former seat, and the old man crossed over to the window and drew the soiled curtain.

"What's the idea?" Chubuk said.

"Gnats," our host answered. "They're such a pest. It's low ground here, the place is full of them."

"You live here alone?" Chubuk suddenly asked. "Then what's that second bed doing in the corner?" He pointed to the sacking on the floor.

Without waiting for a reply, Chubuk got up, pulled the curtain back and put his head out of the window. I got up too.

The window commanded a broad view of the hills and woods. The road ran out into the distance, rising and dipping. On the elevated skyline, against the backcloth of a reddening sky, four moving dots came into view.

"Gnats!" Chubuk shouted roughly at the old man, and eyeing the shrinking figure with a look of contempt, added: "You're a gnat yourself from what I can see of it. Come along, Boris!"

As we ran down, Chubuk stopped to throw a lighted match into a heap of rubbish. The paper there caught fire and the flame crept towards some straw strewn over the floor. In another minute the whole cluttered up room would have been ablaze, had not Chubuk, with a sudden air of decision, stamped the fire out. He dragged me towards the door with an apologetic: "Better not. It'll be ours all the same."

Some ten minutes later four horsemen galloped past the bushes behind which we lay hidden.

"Making for the manor house," Chubuk said. "I guessed the old man wasn't living alone as soon as I saw that sacking on the floor. Did you see the way he kept going up to that window? While we were poking around the rooms downstairs he sent someone to fetch the Whites. The same with the tea. That brandy looked suspicious to me — maybe he put some rat poison into it. I don't like looted but hospitable landowners, I don't trust 'em. He can pretend to be what he likes, but at bottom he's my enemy number one."

We spent the night in a haying shack. A thunderstorm broke during the night with a heavy downpour, but we were glad. The shack was not

leaky, and in bad weather like that we could safely have a good sleep. Chubuk woke me up at the peep of dawn.

"Now we've got to be on guard," he said. "I've been sitting up for some time. I'll take a nap now while you sit up. Somebody may pass this way, you can never tell. But mind you don't fall asleep too."

"I won't fall asleep, Chubuk."

I put my head out of the shack. A stream lay reeking under the hillside. Yesterday we had waded waist-deep through a miry bog. The water had dried on us overnight, but the mud had formed a sticky crust over our bodies.

"I could do with a bathe," I thought. "The stream is close by, just a step down."

I sat on guard over Chubuk for about half an hour, but the desire to run down and have a dip became clamorous. "There's no one around," I said to myself. "Who could be up at such an early hour? Besides, I can't see a sign of any road. I'll be back before Chubuk can turn over on the other side."

The temptation was too great. My body itched all over. Throwing off my useless ammunition belt, I tumbled down the hill.

The stream, however, was not at all as near as I had thought and it must have taken me ten minutes to reach the bank. Throwing off my black school tunic, the one I had run away from home in, and pulling off the leather case, my boots and trousers I plunged into the water. I caught a quick breath. I started threshing around and soon got warm. Gee, how lovely! I swam out quietly into midstream. There, on a sand bank, stood a bush. Something was entangled in it, probably a rag or a shirt that had been lost in rinsing. I parted the branches and recoiled quickly. A man lay there face downwards, his trousers caught in a branch. His shirt was torn and a gaping lacerated wound stood out in a black patch on his back. I swam back with swift hurried strokes as if the devil was after me.

As I dressed I turned my head away with a shudder from the luxuriant green bush growing on the sand bank. Whether it was caused by a jet of the flowing stream or by my accidentally releasing the dead body when parting the branches, but the body floated out, was turned over by the current and carried towards the bank on which I stood.

Hastily pulling on my trousers, I started to put on my tunic to run

away from this spot as quickly as I could. When I thrust my head through the collar the body of the shot man was almost at my feet.

With a wild scream I involuntarily stepped forward and nearly stumbled into the water. I had recognised the dead man. It was one of the three wounded men we had left behind in the care of the beekeeper. It was our Gypsy Kid.

"Hey, laddie!" I heard a shout behind me. "Come here."

Three men were making straight for me. Two of them had rifles. Escape was cut off. In front of me were these men, behind me the river.

"Who are you?" a tall black-bearded man demanded.

I was silent. I did not know who these men were, Reds or Whites.

"I'm speaking to you!" the man repeated more roughly, gripping my arm.

"What's the use of talking to him," another said. "Let's take him down to the village, they'll question him there."

Two carts drove up.

"Give me your whip," Black Beard shouted to one of the drivers, who stood timidly at his horse's head.

"What for?" the other asked. "Why use the whip? Take him down to the village, they'll see to it there."

"I'm not going to whip him. I want to tie his hands. You just look at him — looks like he'll do a bunk at any moment."

My elbows were twisted back and I was pushed gently towards the cart.

"Get in!"

The sleek horses made off for the village at a brisk trot. It was a large village, with white chimneys gleaming on the green hillside.

Sitting in the cart, I was still hoping that these men were partisans from a Red detachment, and that things would be cleared up on the spot and I would be released at once.

Not far from the village a sentry in the bushes challenged us: "Who goes there?"

"Friends ... the headman," Black Beard answered.

"A-a-ah! Where've you been?"

"Getting carts out from the hamlet."

The horses started off at a brisk pace. I had no time to examine the sentry's clothes or his face, as my whole attention was drawn to his shoulders. He was wearing shoulder-straps.*

CHAPTER NINE

No soldiers were to be seen in the street at that hour — they were probably sleeping.

Outside the church stood several dog-carts and a van with a red cross, while sleepy-eyed cooks were splitting firewood next to a field kitchen.

"Take him down to headquarters?" the cart driver asked the headman.

"I suppose so. His Excellency is still asleep though. It's not worth disturbing him for the sake of a kid like this. Let's take him down to the lock-up for the time being."

The cart drew up at a squat little hut with barred windows. I was pushed towards the door. The headman went through my pockets and took away my leather case. The door slammed to and the lock grated.

For the first few minutes of sheer terror that was almost a physical pain, I decided that I was as good as dead, and nothing could save me. The sun would rise higher, His Excellency, of whom the headman had spoken, would send for me, and then — death, the end.

I sat down on a bench and lowered my head on the window-sill, too stupefied to think. The blood hammered at my temples and one and the same thought ran through my mind with the dull iteration of a spoilt gramophone record: "The end, the end, the end..." After revolving sickeningly in this groove, the sharp point of consciousness seemed suddenly to slip into the needful convolution of the brain as if flicked by an invisible finger, and my thoughts raced along madly like a headlong torrent.

"Is there no way out? To get caught so absurdly! Maybe I can escape? No, I can't escape. Maybe the Reds are coming this way and will arrive in time to save me? But if they don't? Or if they come too late, when it's all over? Maybe... No, there is no hope, no way out."

The herd was driven past my window. The sheep ambled along, huddled

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* In those days only the Whites wore shoulder-straps.— *Tr.*

close together, goats bleated amid a tinkle of bells, and the herdsman cracked his whip. A baby calf skipped along, making comical attempts to catch the cow's udder.

This peaceful village scene made me feel the hopelessness of my plight more poignantly than ever. The sense of terror was mixed with and for a brief moment even overshadowed by a sense of angry grievance: a morning like this ... everyone alive ... sheep and all, and you had to die.

And as often happens, out of this chaos of confused thoughts and ridiculous impossible plans there emerged a single, remarkably simple and clear thought, the very one that could suggest a natural avenue of escape.

I had become so used to my position as a Red Army man, a soldier of a proletarian fighting unit, that I had quite forgotten that this was taken for granted and required no proofs, that to prove or deny it was just as useless as trying to prove to a stranger that my hair was white and not black.

"Wait a minute," I said to myself, snatching joyfully at this straw. "All right, I'm a Red. But I'm the only one here who knows it. Are there any signs by which *they* could know it?"

Turning this thought over in my mind, I came to the definite conclusion that there were no such signs. I had no papers certifying that I was a Red Army man. I had lost my grey fur cap with the star badge on it when running away from the guards. My army coat, too, I had thrown away at the same time. The smashed rifle lay in the woods, and I had left my bandolier in the shack before going down to bathe. My tunic was a black one, worn by schoolboys. My age was not that of a soldier. What remained?

Ah, yes! The small Mauser, hidden under my tunic, and what else? The story of how I came to be on the banks of the stream. The Mauser could be stuck away under the stove; as for the story — one could always make up some kind of story.

Not to get muddled up, I decided not to complicate matters by inventing for myself a new name, age and place of birth. I decided to be myself, that is, Boris Gorikov, 5th form pupil of the Arzamas Technical High School, who travelled with his uncle (I would give his real name) to Kharkov to stay with his aunt (I didn't know her address and had relied on my uncle for it). During our journey I was separated from my uncle, and was put off the train because I had no pass or documents (my uncle had them). So then

I decided to walk down the track and get on a train at the next station. But here the Reds ended and the Whites began. If they ask me how I managed to live during my trek, I'll tell them I was given alms and food at the villages. If I were asked why I was going to Kharkov if I did not know my aunt's address, I'll say I had hoped to get it at the address bureau. If they said: "Where the devil do you get address bureau these days?" I'll feign surprise and say: "Why not? There's an address bureau even in such a one-horse town as Arzamas." If they asked: "How did your uncle hope to break through to White Kharkov from Red Russia?" I'll say that my uncle was such a cunning old fox he'd break through to Europe, let alone Kharkov. But I'm no good, I'm no fox. At this point I'd have to break down and cry. Not too much, though, just enough to show how miserable I was. So far so good. As for the rest, I'd see about that when the time came.

I took out my pistol, and was about to thrust it under the stove, but changed my mind. Even if they let me go, I could not get back here to recover it. The room had two windows, one overlooking the street, the other facing a narrow lane, through which ran a path overgrown at the edges with dense nettles. I picked a scrap of paper up from the floor, wrapped the Mauser in it and threw the small package into the thickest part of the nettles. I had no sooner done this than there came a tramp of feet outside. Three others had been brought in — two peasants, who had hidden their horses from the carts round-up, and a boy, who, for some inexplicable reason, had stolen a spare recoil spring off a dog-cart from a machine-gunner. The boy had been beaten up, but he did not moan; he simply breathed hard, as if he had been chased.

Meanwhile the village street was coming to life. Soldiers passed by, horses neighed, mess-tins clanked near the field kitchen. Signalmen appeared, who began to run down telephone wire. A squad marched past under the command of an important-looking sergeant either to mount guard or relieve an outpost.

The lock clicked again and the head of a soldier looked in. Stopping in the doorway, he pulled a crumpled paper out of his pocket, glanced at it and shouted: "Who's Vaald here? Come on out."

I looked at my companions, and they at me, but no one got up.

"Vaald... Well, who's Vaald?"

"Yuri Vaald!" I thought aghast, remembering the papers I had found in the lining, and which I had entirely forgotten about in the excitement

of the last few days. I had no choice. I got up and walked unsteadily towards the door.

"Why, of course," it dawned on me. "They have found the papers and take me for that ... for the dead boy. What rotten luck! I had such a good simple plan worked out, and now I was in a fix, all at sea. I couldn't say the papers were not mine. It would arouse suspicion as to how they came to be in my possession." The so carefully thought out story about my journey to my aunt with an old fox of an uncle was clean forgotten. I had to think up something new, but what? Obviously, I'd have to work something out on the spot.

I straightened up and attempted a smile. But how difficult it sometimes is to look cheerful, how painful to keep the tremor off your lips, twisted, like rubber, into a forced smile!

A tall elderly officer wearing the shoulder-straps of a captain came down the steps of the staff headquarters. At his side, with the air of a kicked dog, walked the village headman. Seeing me, the headman spread his hands with an apologetic gesture, as much as to say, "Sorry for the mistake."

The officer spoke sharply to the village headman, who, with a servile nod, ran off down the street.

"Hullo, prisoner of war," the captain said in a half-amused but quite friendly tone.

"Good morning, sir," I answered.

The officer dismissed my escort and gave me his hand. "What are you doing here?" he said with a sly smile, getting out a cigarette. "Come to fight for Tsar and Country? I read the letter to Colonel Korenkov, but it's of no use to you now, the Colonel was killed a month ago."

"Thank God for that," I said to myself.

"Come into my room. Why didn't you tell the headman who you were? Fancy landing in the lock-up just when you come among friends."

"I didn't know who he was. He looked just a muzhik to me — no shoulder-straps or anything. He may have been a Red for all I know. They're prowling around here, people say," I squeezed out of myself while at the same time thinking that the officer seemed a decent chap, and none too observant, otherwise he would have guessed from my self-conscious manner that I was not the person he took me for.

"I knew your father," the captain said. "It was a long time ago, back

in nineteen 'seven, met him at the manoeuvres in Ozerki. You were a nipper then, only a faint resemblance remains. Don't you remember me?"

"I'm afraid I don't," I answered apologetically, "I have a faint memory of the manoeuvres, but then we had so many officers there."

If I didn't have that "faint resemblance" the captain had spoken of, and if he had had the slightest suspicion, he could have floored me with two simple questions — one about my father, and the other about the Military School.

But the officer had no suspicions. My reason for not having made myself known to the headman sounded quite plausible, and trainees of the Military School in those days were making for the Don en masse.

"You must be hungry? Pakhomov!" he shouted to a soldier who was busy with a samovar. "What have you got to eat?"

"A chicken, sir. The samovar will soon be boiling. The priest's wife has taken out the dough, the cookies will soon be ready."

"A chicken for the two of us? Rustle up something more."

"I have some lard with cracklings, sir, I can warm up yesterday's cheese dumplings."

"Let's have these cheese dumplings, let's have the chicken, only hurry up!"

At this point the telephone buzzed in the next room.

"Captain Schwarz on the phone, sir."

The staff officer gave his orders to Schwarz in a firm calm baritone.

When he had put the receiver down, some other man, apparently an officer, too, asked the captain:

"Has Schwarz got any news about Begichev's detachment?"

"No. Two Reds dropped in on the Kustarev manor yesterday, but they got away. Oh, yes! Write up a report that according to Schwarz's secret service information Shebalov's detachment will try to slip past Colonel Zhikharev in the Reds' screen area. They must be prevented from joining up with Begichev. Well, young man, let's go and have our breakfast. Have a feed and a rest, and then we'll decide where and how to fix you up."

We had no sooner sat down at the table than the batman set before us a bowl of steaming cheese dumplings, the chicken, which, to judge by its size, was more like a full-grown rooster, and a sizzling frying pan with cracklings. I was just about to pick up a wooden spoon, thinking that

fortune, at last, was smiling upon me, when from the gate came a noise, loud talk and swearing.

"You're wanted, sir," the batman said, coming back. "They've brought in a Red with a rifle. Caught him in a shack on Zabelenny meadow. The machine-gunners went out to cut grass and they found him there asleep in the shack with a rifle and grenade next to him. Well, they fell on him and trussed him up. Shall I tell 'em to bring him in, sir?"

"All right. But not in here. Let them wait in the next room while I finish my breakfast."

Once again came a stamp of feet and rifle butts.

"This way!" someone shouted in the next room. "Sit down on the bench, and take your cap off — can't you see the icons."

"Undo my hands first before barking at me!"

The cheese dumplings turned cold in my half-open mouth and flopped back onto the plate. I had recognised the voise of the prisoner — it was Chubuk.

"Hot, eh?" the captain said. "Take it easy."

It is difficult to describe the state of agonising tension I was in. To avoid arousing suspicion I had to appear cheerful and calm. The cheese dumplings were like lumps of soft clay in my mouth. It required a purely physical effort to push a piece down my tightened throat. But the captain was convinced that I was very hungry — I had told him so myself before breakfast — and so I had to force myself to eat. Working slowly at the food with stiff jaws and mechanically impaling browned morsels on my fork, I was crushed by a sense of guilt towards Chubuk. It was I, who despite his warning, had abandoned my post to go and bathe. It was my fault that those two machine-gunners had caught him prisoner. It was my fault that my dearest comrade, the man I loved best of all, had been captured while asleep and brought down to the enemy's staff.

"Why, my boy, you're half asleep, I see," the captain's voice came to me from far away. "You've got a cheese dumpling on the fork in your mouth, but your eyes are closed. Go and lie down in the hay and have a sleep. Pakhomov, show him the way."

I got up and made for the door. I now had to go through the telegraph operators' room in which Chubuk was sitting a prisoner.

It was a painful moment.

The thing was to prevent Chubuk, in his surprise, from giving me away

by a gesture or an exclamation. He had to be given to understand that I would do everything in my power to save him.

Chubuk sat with bowed head. I coughed. He looked up and quickly threw himself back.

But before his back could touch the wall he recovered himself and smothered the startled exclamation that sprang to his lips. As if to stifle my cough I put a finger to my lips, and from the way Chubuk narrowed his eyes and shifted his glance from me to the batman following behind me, I realised that he had understood nothing and believed me, too, to have been arrested on suspicion. His encouraging look said: "Don't be afraid. I won't give you away."

All this silent signalisation was so brief that no one noticed it. I went out into the yard on unsteady feet.

"This way please," the batman said, pointing to a small lean-to. "There's hay inside and a blanket. Lock the door, otherwise you'll have all the pigs in there."

CHAPTER TEN

I buried my head in a leather cushion and lay still. "What's to be done now? How can I save Chubuk? What can I do to help him escape? It's all my fault, and I must clear up the mess I've made. Instead I am sitting eating cheese dumplings and Chubuk must suffer through me."

I could think of nothing, however.

My head grew hot, my cheeks flamed, and little by little a feverish excitement gripped me. "Am I acting honestly? Ought I not go and openly declare that I, too, am a Red, that I am Chubuk's comrade and I want to share his fate?" The simplicity and grandeur of this thought blinded me. "Why, of course," I whispered. "At least I'll be atoning for my unfortunate mistake." I was reminded of a story I had read a long time ago from the days of the French revolution, when a boy, released on parole, returned to the enemy officer to be shot. "Yes, of course," I hurriedly debated with myself, "I'll get up right away, go out and tell them everything. Let the soldiers and the captain see how Red fighters can die. And when they put me up against the wall, I'll shout: "Long live the revolution!' No, not that...

That's what they always shout. I'll throw into their faces: 'Cursed hangmen!' No, I'll say..."

Drunk with a sense of the mournful solemnity of the decision I had taken, I gradually worked myself up to a point when a person's conduct begins to lose all sense of reality.

"I'll get up and go out." Here I sat up in the hay. "But what will I shout out?"

At this point my mind became a whirl of blinding flashing thoughts, and all kinds of crazy phrases swilled back and forth. Instead of hitting on some appropriate dying word, I recalled, for some unknown reason, the old gypsy who had played the flute at weddings in Arzamas. I recalled many other things that had nothing whatever to do with my present state of mind.

"I get up..." I said to myself. But the hay and the blanket held my legs like a fast cement.

And then I realised why I didn't get up. I didn't want to get up, and all those musings about a last dying phrase and about the gypsy were simply an excuse to put off the fateful moment. No matter what I said and how much I worked myself up, I definitely had no desire to give myself up and face the firing squad. When I realised this, I lay back resignedly on the cushion and wept softly over my own insignificance, comparing myself with the famous boy of the remote French revolution.

A thump shook the wall of the lean-to adjoining the house. Somebody in there had hit it with something hard — either a rifle butt or the corner of a bench. Voices could be heard through the wall.

Swift as a lizard, I crept up to the wall and put my ear to the logs. Immediately, I caught the middle of a phrase uttered by the captain: "...so it's no use talking nonsense. You're only making things worse for yourself. How many machine-guns are there in the detachment?"

"Things couldn't be any worse, so why should I beat about the bush?" Chubuk answered.

"How many machine-guns, I ask you?"

"Three. Two Maxims and one Colt."

"He's saying that on purpose," it struck me. "We have only one Colt in the detachment."

"And how many Communists?"

"They're all Communists."

"All of them, you say? Are *you* a Communist?"

Silence.

"Are you a Communist? I'm speaking to you!"

"Why waste breath? You're holding my Party card in your hand."

"Silence! You're one of the rabid ones, I see. Stand up straight when an officer talks to you. Was that you at the manor?"

"Me."

"Who else was with you?"

"A comrade. A Jew."

"A dirty Jew? Where is he?"

"He ran away ... in another direction."

"What direction?"

"The opposite direction."

There was another thump, then the sound of a shifted stool, and the baritone resumed in a drawling voice:

"I'll give you 'opposite direction'. I'll send you in the opposite direction in a minute."

"Instead of beating me, you'd better give the order and have done with it," Chubuk's voice sounded fainter. "If our people caught you, sir, they'd punch you in the jaw once or twice and bump you off. But you've slashed me all over with your whip, and you call yourself an intellectual."

"What-at? What did you say?" the captain shrilled.

"I say there's no need to mess about so long with a man."

A voice interposed, the same voice as before:

"Regimental commander wanted on the phone, sir!"

For some ten minutes there was silence behind the wall. Then the voice of batman Pakhomov was heard on the porch steps:

"Musabekov! Ibragishka!"

"What is it?" a lazy answer issued from out of the raspberry bushes.

"Where the devil are you? Saddle the captain's horse."

From behind the wall came the baritone again:

"Victor Ilyich, I'm going to the Staff. I'll probably be back at night. Ring up Schwarz and tell him to get into touch with Zhikharev at once. Zhikharev has reported that Begichev's and Shebalov's detachments have joined up."

"What about this one?"

"This one? He can be shot. On second thoughts, hold him until I get

back. I'll have another chat with him. Pakhomov," the captain continued, raising his voice, "is the horse ready? Give me my field glasses. Oh, yes — when that boy wakes up give him something to eat. Don't leave any dinner for me. I'll have my dinner there."

Through a chink in the wall I had a glimpse of the black fur hats of the orderlies. There was a muffled stamp of hooves in the dust. Through the same chink I saw Chubuk being escorted to the hut in which I had sat that morning.

"The captain will be back late," I thought. "That means Chubuk will be brought in for the next interrogation at night."

Hope, like a faint breath, cooled my head.

I was free here. No one suspected me. Besides, I was the captain's guest. I could go wherever I wanted, and when it grew dark I would take a stroll as it were and go down the path running past the window at the back of the hut. I'd pick up my Mauser and put it through the bars. In the night the soldiers would come for Chubuk. He would step out onto the porch, and taking advantage of the fact that they would believe him to be unarmed, he would kill both of them before they had a chance to use their rifles. The nights were dark, and two leaps aside would conceal him at once. The thing was to push the pistol through the bars. But that should not be difficult. It was a brick-built hut with strong bars, and so the guard, fearing no escape through the window, sat on the doorstep, guarding the door. Only once in a while he would go to the corner, look round it and go back again.

I came out of the lean-to. To conceal the trace of tears I emptied a dipper of cold water over my head. The batman offered me a mug of kvass, and asked me whether I wanted dinner. I declined the dinner, went out into the street and sat down on the doorstep.

The barred window behind which Chubuk was sitting stared at me from the opposite side of the wide street like a black hole.

"It would be a good thing if Chubuk spotted me," I was thinking. "It would cheer him up and give him to understand that since I was walking about at large I would try to rescue him. How was I to make him look out of the window? I couldn't call out or wave my hand, as the guard would notice it. Ah, I've got it! I'd do what I used to do as a child when I wanted to call Yashka Zuckerstein out into the garden or to the pond."

I ran into the room, took a small mirror off the wall and went back to the

doorstep. First I started examining a pimple on my forehead, then, as if by accident, I played a sunbeam into the roof of the house opposite and from there shifted it imperceptibly to the black hole of the window. The guard sitting by the door did not see the sharp ray striking through the window upon the wall inside. Then, without moving the mirror, I covered the glass with my hand and uncovered it again. I did this several times.

I counted on the prisoner's attention being attracted to the sudden flashes of light in the darkened room. And so it was. The next minute the silhouette of a man appeared in the window under the rays of my searchlight. Giving a few flashes to enable Chubuk to trace the direction of the beam, I laid the mirror aside and stood up to my full height, as if stretching myself, then raised my arm. This, in the language of military signalisation, meant: "Attention! Be prepared!"

Two trim-looking cadets in dusty caps, with rifles slung across their backs, came up to the porch and asked for the captain. A junior officer, second-in-command, came out. The cadets saluted and handed him a packet.

"From Colonel Zhikharev."

From where I sat I could hear the telephone buzzing. The junior officer was insistently calling regimental headquarters. Four soldiers from the companies acting as messengers dashed out of the staff hut and ran off to different ends of the village. A few minutes later the gates on the outskirts were thrown open and ten black Cossacks swept out at a canter. The promptness and efficiency with which staff orders were carried out came as an unpleasant surprise to me.

The disciplined cadets and well-drilled Cossacks who made up the composite detachment were so unlike our own brave, but loud-mouthed and ill-disciplined chaps.

The sun was still fairly high in the sky, but I couldn't sit still. From these preliminaries and snatches of conversation I gathered that the detachment was marching out that night. To beguile the time until nightfall and have a good look round while I was at it, I walked down the village and came out to a pond in which Cossacks were bathing their horses. The horses snorted and their hooves made squelching noises in the soft clayey bed of the pond. The turbid water dripped off their sleek glossy skin in warm rivulets.

On the bank a bearded naked Cossack wearing a cross round his neck

was hacking at the thick growth of broom with his sword.

When swinging back his sword, the Cossack tightened his lips, and when bringing it down he emitted a short sigh, producing that indefinable sound which a butcher makes when dressing a carcass — "Uszza!"

The thick brooms fell under the sharp blade like grass under the scythe. If an enemy arm came under his stroke at the moment he would slash it clean off. If the head of a Red Army man got in the way he would cleave it down from neck to shoulder.

I had occasion already to see what Cossack swords could do. You would never believe that the death blow was dealt by a narrow blade at full gallop; rather did it look like the cool calculated stroke of an axe on the executioner's block delivered by a past master of the art.

Hearing the church bells ringing for vespers, the Cossack dropped his sword practice. He wiped the warmed blade with a grey footwrap, slipped in into the scabbard, and, breathing heavily, crossed himself.

Following a narrow path between the potato beds I came to a spring. The icy water trickled from an old moss-grown log with a cheerful gurgle. A rusty icon set into a rotting wooden cross looked down with dull faded eyes. Under the icon was a faint inscription cut out with a knife: "All icons and saints are a lie."

It was getting dark. "In half an hour I'll be able to make for the brick hut," I thought. I decided to go out to the edge of the village, cross the highroad and make my way from there to the barred window by a side path. I knew the exact spot where my Mauser had dropped. The white paper wrapping showed through the nettles. I decided to pick it up without stopping, thrust it through the bars and walk on as if nothing had happened.

Turning a corner, I found myself on a common. There I saw a group of soldiers and suddenly came face to face with the captain.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, surprised. "Have you come to have a look too? It must be something new to you."

"Have you come back already?" I mumbled, staring at him blankly. I was too stupefied to take in the meaning of his words.

A command uttered on our right made us look round. What I saw there made me clutch the cuff of the captain's sleeve convulsively.

Within twenty paces of us five soldiers with rifles atilt stood facing a man with his back to the wall of a deserted clay-hut. The man was

bareheaded, his arms were tied behind him, and he was staring fixedly at us.

"Chubuk," I whispered, reeling.

The captain looked round in surprise and put his hand on my shoulder with a reassuring gesture. Keeping his eyes on me all the time, and taking no notice of the command which brought the soldiers' rifles to their shoulders, Chubuk straightened up, shook his head contemptuously and spat.

Then there came such a blinding flash, such a crash, as if someone had struck a big drum close to my ear.

I swayed, ripping off the strap on the captain's cuff, and slumped down on the ground.

"What's the meaning of this, cadet?" the captain said sternly. "You old woman, you! You shouldn't have come if your nerves can't stand it. This will never do, young man," he went on more mildly. "Yet you've come running to join the army."

"He's not used to it yet," the officer commanding the firing squad put in, lighting a cigarette. "Take no notice of it. I have a telephone operator in my company, a cadet. At first he used to call his mother in the night, and now he's a regular daredevil. That one made a fine show, though," the officer continued, lowering his voice. "Stood up straight as if on sentry go. And spat, too, mind you!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The same night, during the first five-minutes' halt, I ran away, taking my Mauser with me and slipping into my pocket a grenade that I found lying in the captain's cart.

All night, without stopping, without turning off the dangerous roads, I headed north with a sort of sullen doggedness. I no longer bothered to skirt the danger spots such as the black shadows of shrubs, dark ravines, little bridges, which at any other time would have put me on my guard as possible ambushes. Nothing could be more terrible to me than the experiences of the last few hours.

I stumbled along, trying not to think of anything, not to remember anything, not to wish for anything except to rejoin my detachment as quickly as possible.

The next day, from noon till late dusk, I slept as if chloroformed in the bushes of a hidden hollow. In the night I was up again and on my way. From the talk I had heard at the White headquarters I had a rough idea where I was to seek my detachment. It should be somewhere quite near now. But I trudged round and round the forest trails and country roads till late in the night and nobody stopped me.

The night throbbed with the ceaseless murmur of birds, the croaking of frogs and the buzzing of mosquitoes. Close-drawn and star-spangled, it was alive with the restless cry of an owl, the rustles of the lush foliage, and the smells of the wild orchid and sedge.

Despair gripped me. Where was I to go, where was I to search? I came out to the foot of a wooded hill, where, exhausted, I lay down in a clearing overgrown with fragrant wild clover. I lay there for a long time, and the more I thought about it, the more forcibly was the ghastly mistake that had occurred brought home to me. It sank into my mind like a black sucking leech. It was at me that Chubuk had spat, at me and not at the officer. Chubuk had not understood anything, for he had known nothing about the cadet's papers and I had forgotten to tell him about them. At first Chubuk had believed that I, too, was a prisoner, but when he had seen me sitting outside the hut, and especially afterwards, when the captain had laid a friendly hand on my shoulder, he must have thought that I had gone over to the Whites. There was no other explanation he could find for the concern and attention shown me by the White officer. His spit, ejected at the last minute, seared me like sulphuric acid. More bitter still was the thought that the thing could not be mended, that there was no one I could explain it to and put myself right with, that Chubuk was no more and I would never see him again, neither today, nor tomorrow, nor any other day.

My heart was crushed with a sense of self-reproach at the fatal mistake of my conduct in the forest shack. And there was not a soul around to whom I could unburden my mind. Only silence. Only the hubbub of the birds and the croaking of the frogs.

To this fury against myself was added hatred of this accursed soul-racking silence. In a fit of baffled rage, remorse and despair, I suddenly jumped up, pulled the grenade out of my pocket, released the safety catch and flung it onto the green meadow among the flowers, the dense clover and the dewy bluebells.

The grenade exploded with the deafening crash I yearned for, its wild echo rocketing far away into the distance.

I strode off along the edge of the wood.

"Hey, who goes there?" I presently heard a voice from behind the underbrush.

"It's me," I answered without stopping.

"Who's the *me*? I'll shoot!"

"Shoot, damn you!" I shouted defiantly, drawing my Mauser.

"Stop, you madcap!" cried another voice, which sounded familiar to me. "Wait a minute, Vaska. Why, if it isn't that Boris of ours!"

I had the good sense to control myself before I could let go at one of the men of our own detachment, the miner Maligin.

"Where the devil do you come from? We're not far from here. We were sent to find out who exploded that grenade. Was it you?"

"It was."

"What's the idea, chucking bombs about? Asking for it? You're not drunk by any chance?"

I told my comrades everything — how I fell in with the Whites, how our gallant Chubuk had been captured and died. Only one thing I kept back — that last spit of Chubuk's. While I was at it I reported everything I had heard at headquarters about the plans of the Whites, about the orders that had been given for the detachments of Zhikharev and Schwarz to hunt us down.

"Ah, well," Shebalov said, leaning on his sabre, which was dark with the wear and tear of battle, "that's bad news about Chubuk. He was a fine Red Army man, Chubuk was our best soldier and comrade. That's too bad. You made a big mistake, my lad... A big mistake." At this point Shebalov sighed. "But you can't recall the dead. I don't have to tell you anything — you didn't do it on purpose, of course. It might have happened to anyone."

"Sure, it might have happened to anyone," several voices re-echoed.

"As for the smart way you acted in finding out about Zhikharev and hastening to report it to your comrades — here's my hand and my thanks!"

Turning sharply off to the right and making long night marches, we moved far away from the trap which Zhikharev had set for us. Avoiding the large villages and destroying the small enemy patrols standing in our way, we joined up with Begichev's detachment and a week later contacted the regular units of the Red Army which were acting as a screening force at the Povorino Station sector.

It was during those days that I became a cavalryman. Fedya Sirtsov came up to me while we were bivouacking and slapped me on the back with his hard hand.

"Have you ever ridden horseback, Boris?" he asked.

"I have," I answered. "Only at my uncle's in the country, and that without a saddle. Why?"

"If you could ride without a saddle then you can easily ride a saddled horse. Would you like to join my mounted unit?"

"Why, yes," I answered, eyeing him doubtfully.

"Then you'll take the place of Burdyukov. You can have his horse."

"Why, where is Grisha?"

"Shebalov has kicked him out," Fedya said, swearing. "Kicked him out of the detachment altogether. During a search at the priest's place Grisha slipped a ring on his finger and forgot to take it off. It was a cheap thing, anyway, not worth more than a fiver at the outside in peacetime. It's a darned shame. Shebalov just kicked him out, took the side of that priest."

I wanted to tell Fedya that Shebalov was hardly one to take the priest's side and that probably Grisha had intended to keep that ring, but it occurred to me that Fedya would not like such an explanation and might change his mind about taking me on in his mounted reconnaissance party. So I said nothing. I had long been wanting to join the mounted scouts.

We went to see Shebalov.

Shebalov reluctantly agreed to my transfer from Company One. Unexpected support came from the morose Maligin.

"Let him go," he said. "He's a young nimble lad. As it is, he misses Chubuk, goes about all by himself. He and Chubuk always made a pair, and now he's got nobody."

Shebalov let me go, but he glanced at Fedya darkly and said, half in jest, half in earnest:

"Now mind, Fedya ... don't you spoil the lad for me. You needn't look at me like that, I'm speaking seriously!"

By way of reply Fedya winked to me slyly, as much as to say: "All right, we know how many beans makes five."

A month later I was imitating Fedya like your true cavalryman. I walked about with my legs planted wide apart, I no longer got entangled in my spurs, and I spent all my free time with the skewbald jaded nag which I had inherited from Burdyukov.

I made friends with Fedya Sirtsov, though he was quite unlike Chubuk. As a matter of fact I felt more at ease with Fedya than I did with Chubuk. Chubuk had been a sort of father to me, rather than a mate. Sometimes, when he told you off or put you to shame, you'd just stand simmering and not dare to answer him back. With Fedya, on the other hand, you could have a row and then make up. It was great fun with him even when things were bad. The trouble with Fedya was that he was capricious. When he took a thing into his head there was no stopping him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

One day Shebalov ordered Fedya:

"Saddle the horses, Fedya, and go down to Viselki village. The 2nd Regiment has asked us on the phone to reconnoitre whether there are any Whites there. We haven't got enough line of our own to reach them, so we have to speak through Kostirevo, and they're thinking of running a line out to us direct through Viselki."

Fedya jibbed. It was dirty rainy weather and Viselki was eight kilometres away. It meant trudging through heavy muddy ground, and there was no hope of getting back before dark.

"Who can be at Viselki?" Fedya protested. "Why should Whites be there? It's right out of the way, with marshland all round. If the Whites wanted to they'd use the highroad instead of pushing on to Viselki."

"Nobody's asking you! Do as you're told!" Shebalov interrupted him.

"That's a good 'un! What if I'm told to go in search of the devil's grandmother? Catch me obeying such an order. Send the infantrymen. I was going to reshoe the horses, and besides, the feldsher's been steaming two pails of tobacco to rub the horses down against the itch, and here

you are sending me to Viselki!"

"Fyodor," Shebalov said in a weary voice, "I'm not going to change my order, even if you stand on your head."

Fedya splashed through the mud, swearing and spitting, and shouted at us to get ready.

None of us wanted to drag himself to Viselki through the rain and mire for the sake of some telegraph operators. The men swore at Shebalov, called the telegraph operators sly dogs and lazy beggars, reluctantly saddled the wet horses and reluctantly, without songs, made for the outskirts of the little village.

The thick tacky clay squelched underfoot. We could move only at a walking pace. After an hour, when we were still half-way, we got caught in a downpour. Our coats got drenched and the water trickled from our caps. The road forked. Half a mile to the right, on a sandy hillside, stood a hamlet of five or six farmhouses. Fedya halted, and after a moment's thought, jerked the right rein.

"We'll warm ourselves up and then go on," he said. "You can't even have a smoke in this rain."

It was warm and clean in the spacious tidy cottage, which smelled of something tasty — either roasted goose or pork.

"Oho!" Fedya whispered, sniffing the air. "This farm is still well-stocked, I see."

The host turned out to be a hospitable man. He winked at a brawny maid, who, with a saucy look at Fedya, plumped wooden bowls down on the table, tossed out wooden spoons, and moving up the stools, said with a smile:

"What are you standing there? Sit down."

"Is it far from here to Viselki?" Fedya asked the host.

"In summer, when it's dry, we take a short cut through the marsh," the old man answered. "It isn't far at all, half an hour's walk at the most. But you can't do it now, you'll get stuck. By the road you were riding it will take a couple of hours, I daresay. It's a bad road, though, especially by the little bridge over the spring. On horseback it's all right, but it's bad in a cart. My son-in-law just came back from there and even broke a shaft."

"Got back today?"

"Yes, this morning."

"D'you know if there are any Whites there?"

"Not that I know of."

"That Shebalov gives you the pip. I told him there were no Whites there. If there weren't any this morning, then there aren't any now. It's been raining cats and dogs all day — who's going to drag himself out there. Come on, take your things off, boys. Catch me going on in this weather. We'll only break the horses' legs."

"Will it be all right, Fedya?" I said. "What will Shebalov say?"

"I don't care what Shebalov says," Fedya answered, throwing off his heavy mud-spattered greatcoat. "We'll tell Shebalov we've been there and didn't find any Whites."

A bottle of homebrew was served with the dinner. Fedya filled the cups and poured one for me too.

"Here's to the world proletariat and the revolution," he said. "I hope to God the revolution lasts our time and the supply of Whites never runs out! At least there's somebody to slash, God bless 'em, otherwise life on this earth would be a bore. Here goes!"

Seeing that I had not raised my cup, Fedya gave a whistle.

"Whew! You don't mean to say you've never had one, Boris? You're no cavalryman, I see, you're a sissy."

"Who said I'd never had one?" I lied, blushing hotly, and tossed it back.

The pungent liquor caught at my throat and took my breath away. I bent my head and clamped my mouth down on a soft pickled cucumber. Soon I was in a gay mood. Fedya pulled his accordion out of its leather case and struck up a tune that made you feel light at heart. Then we drank some more, drank to the health of the Red Army men who were fighting the Whites, and to our comrades the horses, who carried us into mortal combat, and to our sabres — may they never get blunted in their job of hacking off White heads — and a good deal more we drank to that evening.

Fedya drank more and kept more sober than anyone else. Black locks of hair clung to his clammy forehead. He worked the bellows of his accordion furiously, singing in a soft tenor voice:

The Reds are abroad across the Don...

while we joined it in a straggling chorus:

Hey, hey, have a good time...

Then off again went Fedya, tossing his head and screwing up his moist eyes:

Their companion a sharp knife
And a trusty sword...

which we re-echoed in a swaggering reckless recitative:

And a trusty sword...

Then all together in a chorus:

E-ekh! Life is a gamble...
Not worth a kopek...

Fedya wound up on such a high note that he drowned out all our voices and his accordion. He lowered his head and sat brooding for a while, then tossed his head furiously, as if a bee had stung him, banged his fist down on the table and reached for his cup again.

We left late in the evening. I had difficulty in getting my foot into the stirrup, and when I did finally mount my horse it seemed to me that I was sitting in a swing instead of a saddle. My head spun and I felt sick. It was drizzling, the horses were restive, kept breaking ranks and colliding with those in front. I swayed for a long time in the saddle, and finally slumped over my horse's mane like a dead man.

The next morning I had a bad hangover. I went out into the yard, feeling disgusted with the happenings of the night before. There was not a grain of oats in the horse's nosebag. On returning in the evening I had scattered all the oats in the mud. Fedya's stallion, on the other hand, had his feeding trough piled high. I got a bucket and filled it from the trough. In the entry I ran into two of our scouts. They both looked angry, bleary-eyed and fuzzy.

"Do I look like that?" I wondered, startled, and went off to get a wash. I was a long time at it. Afterwards I went out into the street. A ground frost had settled overnight, and the sparse flakes of the year's first snow dropped onto the hardened clay of the battered roadway. Fedya Sirtsov hastened up to me from behind, yelling:

"What's the idea, you son of a gun, helping yourself to my oats? I'll punch your jaw for you if I catch you at it again!"

"You'll get tit for tat," I snapped back. "Has your horse got to burst, or what? Why did you take an extra measure for your horse when you were sharing out?"

"That's none o' your business!" Fedya shouted, foaming at the mouth as he sprang up to me, waving his whip about.

"Put that whip away, Fedya!" I yelled in a towering rage, knowing

Fedya's mad ways. "If you as much as touch me with that whip I'll fetch you one on the nob with the flat of my sword!"

"Oh, you will, will you!"

Fedya went right off the handle and I don't know how this conversation of ours would have ended had not Shebalov appeared from round the corner.

Fedya did not like Shebalov and was a bit afraid of him, so he took a vicious swipe at a little dog who happened to be around, and went away, after showing me his fist.

"Come here," Shebalov said to me.

I went up.

"What's the idea — one minute you and Fedya all but hug each other, the next you're like cat and dog? Come into my hut."

Shutting the door behind him, Shebalov sat down and asked:

"Were you at Viselki with Fedya too?"

"Yes," I answered, thrown into confusion.

"Don't tell lies! None of you were there. Where were you all that time?"

"At Viselki," I repeated doggedly.

Angry though I was with Fedya I did not want to let him down.

"All right," Shebalov said after a thoughtful pause. "I'm glad to hear it. I had my doubts, you know, but I didn't want to ask Fedya — he'd tell me a lie just the same. Those bums of his are a choice lot too. They rang me up from the 2nd Regiment, wild as anything. 'We sent our telephone operators down to Viselki,' they said, 'taking your word for it, but they barely got away by the skin of their teeth.' I says to them: 'Then the Whites must have come afterwards,' but to myself I said: 'The devil knows that Fedya. He came back late and smelling of vodka.'"

Shebalov crossed over to the window, pressed his forehead against the misted pane, and stood there for several minutes in silence.

"They're giving me no end of trouble, those scouts," he resumed, turning round. "They're brave boys, mind you, but they're a bad lot. And Fedya, too — absolutely no discipline. I'd drive him out, only there's nobody I can replace him with."

Shebalov looked at me in a friendly way. His tufted eyebrows smoothed out and his grey eyes, always screwed up to give them a stern expression, radiated a warm shy smile, as he said with sincerity:

"You've got no idea how difficult it is to command a detachment! Bootmaking is child's play compared to it. I sit nights poring over the map, trying to get used to it. Sometimes I feel dazed. I've got no education, general or military, and the Whites are so stubborn. It's all right for their captains, they're educated and have always been on the job, but I can barely spell out a military order. And on top of it, we've got such boys here. They've got discipline there. Said and done. But our men haven't got used to it yet, you've got to check up on everything yourself. In other units at least they have commissars. I keep asking for one, but they tell me: 'You can do without it for the time being, you're a Communist yourself.' But what Communist am I?" He corrected himself: "I'm a Communist, of course, but I have no education."

The burly Sukharev and the Czech Galda burst into the room.

"I a soldier give for reconnaissance, I a soldier give for machine-gun, I a soldier give for kitchen — but he give nothing," the hooknosed Galda said indignantly, pointing at the flushed and angry Sukharev.

"He gave a man to the kitchen to peel potatoes," Sukharev shouted, "but I didn't take the picket off until midday! He gave a man to the machine-gunners, but my boys from Platoon 2 have been helping the artillerymen to repair the bridge since this morning. I'm not going to give any men for communications, and that's flat! Let him give them."

Shebalov's pale eyebrows contracted and his eyes narrowed. Not a trace remained of the shy good-natured smile in his grey weather-beaten face.

"Sukharev," he said sternly, leaning on his sabre. "No nonsense, please! Look at the fuss you're making because your men haven't slept for one night. You know very well that I'm giving Galda a rest because I'm sending him on a special assignment. He's going out to Novoselovo tonight."

Sukharev let off three long bursts of unaddressed oaths; the hooknosed Galda, mixing Russian words with Czech, started to wave his arms about. I went out.

I felt ashamed at having lied to Shebalov. "Shebalov is our commander," I said to myself. "He goes without sleep and has a hard time. But we ... this is the way we do our duty. Why did I have to tell him a lie about our reconnaissance having been at Viselki? We only let the telephone operators down. Luckily no one was killed. It isn't right though, it's not playing fair towards the revolution and towards one's comrades."

I tried to justify myself in my own eyes by the fact that Fedya was my chief and he had ordered the change of route, but the next minute I saw how lame this excuse was. "Did your chief order you to drink vodka too?" I thought, furious with myself. "Did he order you to tell the commander a lie?"

Fedya's tousled head was thrust out of the window and he called out: "Boris!"

I made as if I had not heard him.

"Boris!" he repeated in a conciliatory tone. "Oh, don't be so touchy. Come and have some pancakes. Come on. I've got something to tell you. Tuck in!" he said, moving the frying-pan up to me and peering anxiously into my face. "What did Shebalov call you for?"

"Asked me about Viselki," I answered bluntly. "'You weren't there at all,' he says."

"And what did you say?"

Fedya fidgeted so uneasily that one would think he had been seated in the frying-pan together with the pancakes.

"What could I say? I ought to have come clean, but I was sorry for you, damn fool that you are."

"Easy now," Fedya began truculently, but then, remembering that he had not got everything out of me yet, he moved up and asked with worried curiosity: "What else did he say?"

"He said you were cowards and self-seekers," I lied to Fedya to his face. "'They were afraid to show their noses at Viselki,' he says, 'and they sat it out somewhere in a ravine, most likely. I've noticed for some time that the scouts are getting funky,' he says."

"You're making it up!" Fedya said angrily. "He didn't say anything of the sort."

"Go and ask him," I went on maliciously. "'I'd better send the infantry out on such jobs,' he says. 'All these scouts are good for is to nose out cream jugs in people's cellars.'"

"You're lying!" Fedya went up in the air. "He must have said: 'Those lazybones are getting out of hand, they've got to be disciplined,' but he didn't say anything about the scouts getting funky."

"What if he didn't," I admitted, well satisfied at having got Fedya's rag out. "Even if he didn't, do you think it's right? Our comrades relied on us, and this is what we go and do. Because of you a regiment of men

were misled. How are people going to look at us now? 'Self-seekers,' they'll say, 'you can't trust them. They go and report that there are no Whites at Viselki, and when the signalmen go out to lay down the wire they get fired at.'"

"Who fired at them?" Fedya said, surprised.

"The Whites, of course. Who else?"

Fedya looked put out. He knew nothing about the telephone men having got into trouble through him, and the thing touched him to the quick. He withdrew into the next room without a word.

He got out his hoarse-voiced accordion and gave vent to his bad feelings in the sad old waltz *On the Hills of Manchuria.*

Presently he broke off abruptly, and hitching on his Caucasian sword, walked out of the hut.

Some fifteen minutes later he reappeared under the window.

"Get on your horse, quick!" he commanded gruffly through the window-pane.

"Where have you been?"

"With Shebalov. Get a move on!"

Shortly our scout party rode past the outguard at a jog-trot over the lightly frozen road.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At the crossroads where we had turned off to the farmstead the evening before, Fedya halted, and calling aside two of his smartest men, spoke to them for a long time, pointing down the road, then, swearing at each of them in turn to hammer home his instructions, he rejoined us and ordered us to turn off to the farmstead. There, without a single word that would have reminded our host about yesterday's doings, Fedya questioned him about the short cut to Viselki through the marsh.

"You won't be able to make it, comrades," the man said. "You'll only drown your horses. It's been raining all the week, you couldn't go through on foot, leave alone on horseback."

Meanwhile the two scouts Fedya had sent on ahead returned and reported that Viselki was occupied by the Whites and that there was a road block there. Taking no notice of the farmer's expostulations, Fedya

ordered him to get ready. The man swore more earnestly than ever that the marsh was simply impassable. His wife started to cry. The rosy-cheeked girl, his daughter, who had exchanged saucy glances with Fedya the night before, snapped his head off for making a mess on the floor with his muddy boots. But Fedya was deaf to everything and insisted on having his own way. I asked him what his plans were, but he did not even swear by way of reply, he just glanced at me sideways with a twisted ironical smile.

Presently we rode out of the farmstead. The farmer rode ahead beside Fedya on a poor nag of a horse. We turned off once into a birch wood. Muddy water squirted from the quaggy moss under the horses' hooves. The road got worse and worse. The horses sunk deeper and deeper in the mire; here and there moss-grown hummocks stuck out in blackened islets over the waterlogged meadow.

We dismounted and walked on. We proceeded in this way until we came to the brushwood road the farmer had told us about. Before us lay a narrow strip covered with a thick ooze of twigs and rotted hay that had risen to the surface.

"H'm," Fedya muttered, stealing a glance at his frowning comrades. "Some road, this!"

"We'll drown, Fedya!"

"Easy as anything," the old farmer, our guide, put in. "The brushwood has rotted away, it's bad enough even in good weather."

"The horses can't swim or wade through this devil's muck."

"Never mind!" Fedya said encouragingly with a forced smile. "We'll beat the devil at it!"

He jerked the bridle of his jibbing horse and was first to plunge knee-deep into the rank-smelling mire. We followed him, two at a time. The water, filmed over here and there with an ice crust, trickled down the tops of our boots. The thin hidden litter shook under our feet. It was terrifying to step out blindly, expecting at any moment that your foot would find no support and you would be sucked down into a slimy bottomless hole.

The horses snorted, jibbed and quivered. From somewhere out in the mist came Fedya's question, like a voice from the other world:

"Hullo there, are you all alive?"

"Well, boys, we've come to the end of our tether. Hadn't we better turn back?" out ginger bugler muttered, his teeth chattering from cold.

Suddenly Fedya popped out of the mist.

"Now then, Pasha, don't you start a panic," he warned him in a low angry voice. "If you're going to whine, then you'd better turn back and go back by yourself. I say, Dad," he turned to the old man, "my horse is up to the belly in it. Have we a long way to go yet?"

"It's not far now. The ground will rise soon, it'll be drier, but the spot before that is the most dangerous of all. If we pass that now, then we're safe for the rest of the way."

The water reached our waists. The old man halted to take off his cap and cross himself.

"Now I'll go ahead and you follow me in single file, otherwise you'll tumble in."

The old man jammed his cap down and went forward. He walked slowly, stopping frequently to grope for the sunken brushwood road with his staff.

Strung out in a line, chilled by the frost-laden wind, drenched by the swamp water beneath, and our clothes sodden by the damp mist above we did no more than a hundred yards in half an hour. My hands were blue and my knees shook.

"That damned Fedya!" I said to myself. "Yesterday he didn't want to go because the road was muddy, and today he's led us into a quagmire."

A horse winnied in front of us. The mist tore apart, and on a hillock we saw Fedya, now sitting astride his horse.

"Sh," he whispered, when we crowded round him, wet and shivering. "Viselki's behind those bushes, within a hundred paces. It's dry further on."

With wild whoops and whistling our half-frozen cavalry tore into the little village from the side the Whites least expected us. Scattering bombs about us we dashed to the small church next to which the White detachment had its headquarters.

In Viselki we captured ten prisoners and a machine-gun. When, tired, but pleased, we were returning to our unit by the main road, Fedya, who was riding beside me, laughed a harsh wry laugh.

"That's got the better of Shebalov, anyway! Will he be suprised!"

"What d'you mean?" I said blankly. "He'll be pleased."

"He will and he won't. He'll be annoyed that things turned out my way, not his, and with such good luck too."

"I don't understand, Fedya," I said with misgiving. "But didn't Shebalov send you out himself?"

"He did, but not that way. He sent me to Novoselovo, to wait for Galda there. But I went and turned off to Viselki. That'll teach him to kick up such a row over yesterday's business. He's got nothing to say for himself now. With these prisoners and the machine-gun we've captured he can't say a word."

"I don't know about luck," I thought. "It doesn't sound right to me. We were sent to Novoselovo, but went to Viselki instead. Luckily things ended the way they did. What if we had got stranded in that swamp — where should we be then? What excuse would we have?"

While still at some distance from the village where our detachment was stationed, we noticed signs of unusual activity there. Red Army men ran about on the outskirts, scattering in extended line. Several horsemen galloped past the vegetable plots.

And then suddenly a machine-gun in the village started chattering. Pasha, our bugler, the one who had suggested turning back from the swamp, dropped into the roadway.

"This way!" Fedya yelled, heading his horse for a hollow.

A second burst of machine-gun fire followed the first, and two scouts bringing up the rear toppled to the ground.

One man's foot got stuck in the stirrup and the frightened horse dragged the wounded man along with him.

"Fedya," I gasped, petrified, "why, that's our Colt blazing away. They're not expecting you from this side. We were supposed to be at Novoselovo."

"I'll give 'em blazes in a minute!" Fedya snarled, jumping off his horse and rushing over to the machine-gun we had captured from the Whites.

"What are you doing, Fedya, you madman! Firing at your own men? They don't know, but you do!"

Then, breathing heavily, he struck the top of his boot a savage blow with his whip, leapt into the saddle and sprang out onto the hilltop. Several bullets whistled over his head, but Fedya stood up in the stirrups to his full height and raised his cap aloft on the tip of his bayonet.

Several more shots were fired from the village, then all grew quiet. Our people had seen the signals of the lone horseman standing under the rain of bullets.

Fedya waved to us not to move too soon, and, spurring his horse, he dashed into the village at a full gallop. After a while we followed him. On the outskirts we were met by Shebalov, grey-faced and grim. His eyes in his haggard face had a faded look, his sabre was covered with dirt and his muddy spurs barely clinked. He ordered the scout party to their billets. His eyes glided over the men with a weary look, then he ordered me to dismount and surrender my weapons. Silently, in front of the whole detachment I slipped from the saddle, unfastened my sword and handed it to the scowling Maligin together with my rifle.

The detachment paid dearly for the scout party's daring but wilful raid on Viselki. Besides the three horsemen who had come under the fire of their own machine-gun, Galda's 2nd Company was routed at Novoselovo, where Fedya was to have met it, and Galda himself was killed. The Red Army men of our detachment were furious and demanded that Fedya, who was arrested, should be tried and severely punished.

"We can't go on like this, fellows! We must have discipline. At this rate we'll all be killed off and cause the death of our comrades too. What's the sense in appointing commanders if everyone's going to act on his own."

That night Shebalov came to see me. I made a clean breast of it and told him everything. I confessed that I had lied to him about Fedya through a sense of comradeship when I was asked that first time whether we had been to Viselki or not. Then and there I swore that I knew nothing about Fedya's wilful action, when he led us to Viselki instead of to Novoselovo.

"Look here, Boris," Shebalov said, "you've lied to me once already, and if I take your word for it this time and don't have you court-martialled together with Fedya, it's only because you're so young. But don't make any more of these mistakes, my boy. It was through your mistake that Chubuk lost his life, and it was through you fellows that the signalmen ran into the Whites. You've made enough mistakes! I say nothing about that devil Fedya — he's been a thorn in my side, more of a nuisance than a help. Now go back to Sukharev in Company One and take up your old place. Frankly, I made a blunder that time in letting you go to join Fedya. Chubuk ... he was different, you had something to learn from him. But Fedya? He's unreliable. And generally speaking, what's the idea taking up now with one fellow, now with another? You've got to make friends

with everybody. When a man's on his own it's easier for him to go wrong and make mistakes."

That night Fedya escaped through the window of the hut in which he was being kept under arrest, and together with four of his cronies, he galloped off to the south through the front. It was said that he had gone to join Makhno, the bandit chief.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Reds assumed the offensive all along the front.

Our detachment was subordinated to the Brigade Commander and occupied a small section on the left flank on the 3rd Regiment.

A fortnight had passed in heavy marches. The Cossacks fell back, hanging on to every village and farmstead.

Throughout those days I had but one desire — to atone for my guilt before my comrades and earn the honour of being enrolled in the Party.

In vain did I volunteer for dangerous scoutings. In vain did I stand up to my full height, pale, with teeth clenched, when many a tough soldier fired from the knee or lying down. No one yielded to me his turn to go out on reconnaissance, no one took any notice of my ostentatious heroism.

Sukharev even remarked to me once in passing:

"Why do you try to ape Fedya? Showing off in front of the men. There are braver soldiers than you here. What sense is there in sticking your neck out?"

"Fedya again," I thought with vexation. "I'm always having him thrown into my face. Why can't they give me a real job and say — now, do that, and everything will be forgotten, you'll become our friend and comrade again?"

Chubuk was gone. Fedya was with Makhno. Who wanted Fedya, anyway? I had made no special friends with anybody. Besides, the men gave me cold shoulder. Even Maligin, who used to like to have a chat with me, invite me to tea and tell me things — even he turned cold now.

Once I heard him through the door tell Shebalov about me:

"He goes about sort of miserable. Maybe he misses Fedya? Mind you, he didn't miss Chubuk very long when he got killed through him."

Colour flooded my face.

It was true: somehow, I had soon got used to he loss of Chubuk; but it wasn't true about my missing Fedya — I hated the man.

I could hear the clink of Shebalov's spurs as he paced the earthen floor. After a pause, he answered:

"You're wrong there, Maligin. Yes. The boy's unspoilt. He can live it down yet. You're forty, Maligin, you can't be re-educated, but he's only fifteen. You and I are worn-down boots, resoled and nailed, but he's like a new upper, on whatever last you put him, that's the shape he'll take. Sukharev tells me he apes Fedya, likes to jump up in the skirmish line and show off how brave he is. But I tell him: 'You're a bearded old geezer, Sukharev, but you're blind. He's not aping Fedya at all, the lad's simply trying to make good and he doesn't know how.'"

At this point Shebalov was called out by a messenger tapping on the window. The conversation was interrupted.

I felt better.

I had gone to fight for the "bright kingdom of socialism". That kingdom was somewhere far off. To reach it one had to trudge many difficult roads and overcome many formidable obstacles.

The Whites were the main obstacle along this path, and in joining the army, I had not yet learnt to hate the Whites the way miner Maligin, or Shebalov hated them, or dozens of others like them, who were not only fighting for the future, but settling their accounts for the painful past.

But now it was different. Now the atmosphere of rankling hatred, the stories of a past of which I had known nothing, of unredressed wrongs and grievances that had accumulated through the centuries, had gradually kindled an answering flame in me. I was like an iron nail, which, accidentally dropped into the ashes, becomes white-hot from the heat of the burning coals.

Through that deep hatred the distant lights of the "bright kingdom of socialism" glowed more alluringly than ever.

That evening I got a sheet of paper from our storekeeper and wrote a long application, asking to be admitted to membership of the Party.

I took this application to Shebalov. He was busy talking to a commissary chief and Company Commander Piskarev, who had been appointed in place of the late Galda.

I sat down on a bench and waited a long time for them to finish their business conversation. During the talk Shebalov looked up at me intently

several times as if trying to guess what I had come for.

When the men had gone, Shebalov got out his notebook, jotted something down in it, shouted out to the messenger to run and call Sukharev, and then turned to me, saying:

"Well, what is it?"

"I've come, Comrade Shebalov ... to ... er, see you," I answered, stepping up to the table and feeling a light shiver run up my spine.

"So I see!" he said more gently, evidently noticing the excited state I was in. "Well, out with it."

Everything I had wanted to say to Shebalov before asking him for his recommendation to membership of the Party, the whole long explanation I had prepared to convince him that although I was to blame for what had happened to Chubuk and for deceiving him about Fedya, I wasn't really as bad as all that and never would be — all this was clean forgotten.

Silently, I handed him the sheet of paper.

It seemed to me as if the ghost of a smile born from under his fair eyebrows slid down to his chapped lips as he became immersed in my long application.

He read it half through and laid the paper aside.

I started, realising that this meant a refusal. But Shebalov's face belied this. It was calm, slightly tired-looking, and his pale eyes mirrored the window panes which were covered with frostwork.

"Sit down," Shebalov said.

I complied.

"So you want to join the Party?"

"I do," I answered quietly but firmly.

It seemed to me that Shebalov was putting his questions merely to show how unrealisable my desire was.

"Ever so much?"

"Ever so much," I intoned, and shifting my glance to the corner, which was hung about with dusty icons, I decided that Shebalov was simply making fun of me.

"I'm glad to hear that," Shebalov resumed, and only now did I realise by his tone that he was not making fun of me at all — he was smiling at me in a friendly way.

He picked up a pencil that was lying among the breadcrumbs scattered

over the table, moved up my application and signed his name on it together with the number of his Party card.

Having done this, he turned round to me together with the stool he was sitting on and said good-naturedly:

"Well, old chap, you'd better look out now. I'm not only your commander, I'm your godfather, in a manner of speaking. Mind you don't let me down."

"I'll never let you down, Comrade Shebalov," I said earnestly, snatching the sheet of paper off the table with unseemly haste. "Neither you nor any of my comrades, not for anything in the world!"

"Wait a minute!" he checked me. "You'll need a second signature. Who else could we have to recommend you? Ah!" he sang out at the sight of Sukharev, who came into the room. "You're the very man."

Sukharev took off his cap, shook off the snow, clumsily wiped his huge boots on the sack that served as a mat, leaned his rifle against the wall and asked, as he held his chilled hands against the hot stove:

"What did you call me for?"

"Business. It's about the guard. The boys at the cemetery have got to be fixed up in the church. We can't have the men freezing. The priest will be here in a minute, we'll make arrangements with him. And now..." Here Shebalov smiled slyly and jerked his head in my direction. "How's this lad acquitting himself?"

"What d'you mean?" Sukharev asked cautiously, a grin spreading over his red weather-beaten face.

"As a soldier, I mean. Make your report of him, regulation style."

"He's not a bad soldier," Sukharev answered after a thoughtful pause. "Does his duty well. There's nothing against him. Only he's a bit harum-scarum. And after Fedya, he's none too keen to make friends with the chaps. They're wild with Fedya, may a bomb blast him."

At this point Sukharev blew his nose, his face reddening still more, and he continued angrily:

"May he get his head slashed open by a *Haidamak!* Through him we lost a commander like Galda! What a company commander he was! You'll never find another one like him. Call that Piskarev a company commander? He isn't a company commander, he's a block o' wood. Only today I told him: 'Your patrols are for communication. I gave ten extra men yesterday for guard duty,' but he —"

"Never mind that!" Shebalov interrupted. "Don't run that old gramophone record. You're crying up Galda now, but you were always like cat-and-dog with him before. What ten extra men are you talking about? You can't fool me. But we can go into that later. Tell me this. The lad wants to join the Party. Will you go surety for him? What are you staring at? Didn't you say yourself he was a good soldier, there was nothing against him, and as for the past — we can't keep raking it up for ever!"

"That's true enough," Sukharev said, scratching his head and dragging out his words. "The devil knows."

"The devil knows nothing! You're company commander, and a Party man at that. You should know better than the devil whether your Red Army man is fit to be a Communist or not."

"He's not a bad chap," Sukharev acquiesced. "The trouble with him is swank. He always pushes himself forward in the skirmish line, sticks his neck out for nothing. Otherwise he's all right."

"So long as he doesn't back out. That's not so bad. Well, what do you say? Will you sign or not?"

"I don't mind signing, he's not a bad chap," Sukharev repeated cautiously. "Who else is going to sign?"

"I am. Come on, sit down at the table, here's his application."

"You've signed it!" Sukharev said, taking the pencil into his bear's paw of a hand. "That's good. The lad's one in a thousand, only he hasn't been spanked enough as a kid!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fighting outside Novokhopersk had been going on now for several days. All divisional reserves had been drawn upon, but the Cossacks still stood firm.

The morning of the fourth day opened with a lull.

"Well, boys," Shebalov said, riding up to the dense line of the detachment strung along the brow of the hill, which was bare of snow. "There's going to be a general offensive this afternoon. The whole division is cracking into it."

His rime-silvered horse stood steaming. The long heavy sabre gleamed dazzlingly in the sunshine and the red top of his black fur hat made a

brilliant splash of colour amid the cold snowy field.

"Well, fellows," Shebalov repeated in a vibrant voice. "This is a big day. If we dislodge the Whites here, they won't find a foothold all the way to Boguchar. Make a last good showing, don't put your old man to shame before the division!"

"Old man your grandmother!" Maligin barked, hoarse-voiced, as he came up. "I'm a bit older than you, but I pass as a young 'un."

"You and I are a pair of worn-down old boots," Shebalov repeated his pet saying. "Boris!" he called out in a friendly tone. "How old are you?"

"Getting on for sixteen already, Comrade Shebalov," I answered proudly. "I turned fifteen on the twenty-second of this month!"

"Already! I like that!" Shebalov said with feigned indignation. "I've turned forty-six already. Hear that, Maligin? Sixteen, eh? The things he'll see, you and I will never see..."

"We'll have a peep at 'em from the next world," Maligin said with grim humour, muffling his neck up in the torn officer's hood.

Shebalov touched his restive horse with the spur and galloped down the line of campfires.

"Come and have tea, Boris. My hot water, your sugar!" shouted Vaska Shmakov, taking his sooty billycan off the fire.

"I haven't got any sugar either."

"What have you got then?"

"Some bread, and I can give you some frozen apples."

"Come on with your bread then. I've got nothing at all, just plain water."

"Gorikov!" someone hailed me from another campfire. "Come here."

I went up to a group of Red Army men, who were engaged in some argument.

"Maybe you can tell us," Grishka Cherkasov, a ginger lad nicknamed Psalm-Reader, said to me. "Let's listen to this man. You studied geography, didn't you? Well, what comes after this place here?"

"In what direction? In the south the next place will be Boguchar."

"And then what?"

"And then Rostov. Oh, lots of other places. Novorossiisk, Vladikavkaz, Tiflis, and still farther Turkey. Why?"

"So many of 'em!" Grishka murmured, scratching his ear. "At this rate we'll have to go on fighting half our lives. I heard that Rostov is by the

sea. And that, I thought, would see the end of it."

The men started laughing and Grishka looked at them in dismay. He slapped his thighs and cried:

"Holy Moses! Look how long we'll have to fight!"

The talk died down.

A horseman came down the road behind the lines at full gallop. Shebalov rode forward at a trot to meet him. The field gun on the flank fired two more shots.

"Company One, this way!" Sukharev shouted, waving his arms.

Several hours later our skirmish lines rose from the white snowdrifts in which they had been lying. Strung out and bleeding, knee-deep in the snow, our detachment went into action in face of the enemy's machine-guns and shells to deliver the last decisive blow. Just when our advance units burst into the outskirts a bullet hit me in the right side.

I staggered and sat down in the soft trampled snow. "It's nothing," I thought, "just a scratch. I haven't lost consciousness, that means I haven't been killed. Once I haven't been killed then I'll pull through."

The infantry, running far ahead, looked like so many black dots.

"It's nothing," I thought, holding on to a bush and leaning my head on the branches. "The stretcher-bearers will soon come along and pick me up."

It was quiet in the field, but fighting was still going on in the neighbouring section, whence came a muffled roar. A solitary rocket hung poised in the air like a yellow-flaming comet.

A trickle of warm blood seeped through my tunic. "What if the stretcher-bearers don't come and I die?" I thought, shutting my eyes.

A big black jackdaw alighted on the dirty snow and made for a heap of horse dung lying nearby with quick little steps. Then suddenly the bird turned its head, glanced askance at me and flew away with a flap of its heavy wings.

Jackdaws are not afraid of dead men. When I die from loss of blood the bird will come back and sit down next to me.

My head began to nod weakly. The shell bursts raking the snowdrifts on the right flank grew fainter and fainter, and the rockets brighter and more frequent.

Night sent out a patrol of a thousand stars to let me get another look at them. It sent out a bright moon too. I was thinking: "Chubuk lived, and so did Gypsy Kid, and so did Polecat... Now they're gone, and I'll be gone

too." I recollected Gypsy Kid once telling me: "Ever since then I've been searching for the good life." "You think you'll find it?" I had asked him. And he had answered: "Not by myself, I wouldn't. But all together we ought to, being so keen on it."

"Yes, yes! All together," I whispered, snatching at the thought. "All together, certainly." My eyes closed and my thoughts wandered off along unrememberable but pleasant paths.

"Boris!" I heard a strained whisper.

I opened my eyes. Close by, hugging the trunk of a young birch tree splintered by a shell, sat Vaska Shmakov.

He had no cap on and his eyes were staring out into the moist deepening twilight, where the lights of the distant railway station glimmered in golden clusters.

"Boris!" his faint whisper reached my ears. "We've captured it after all."

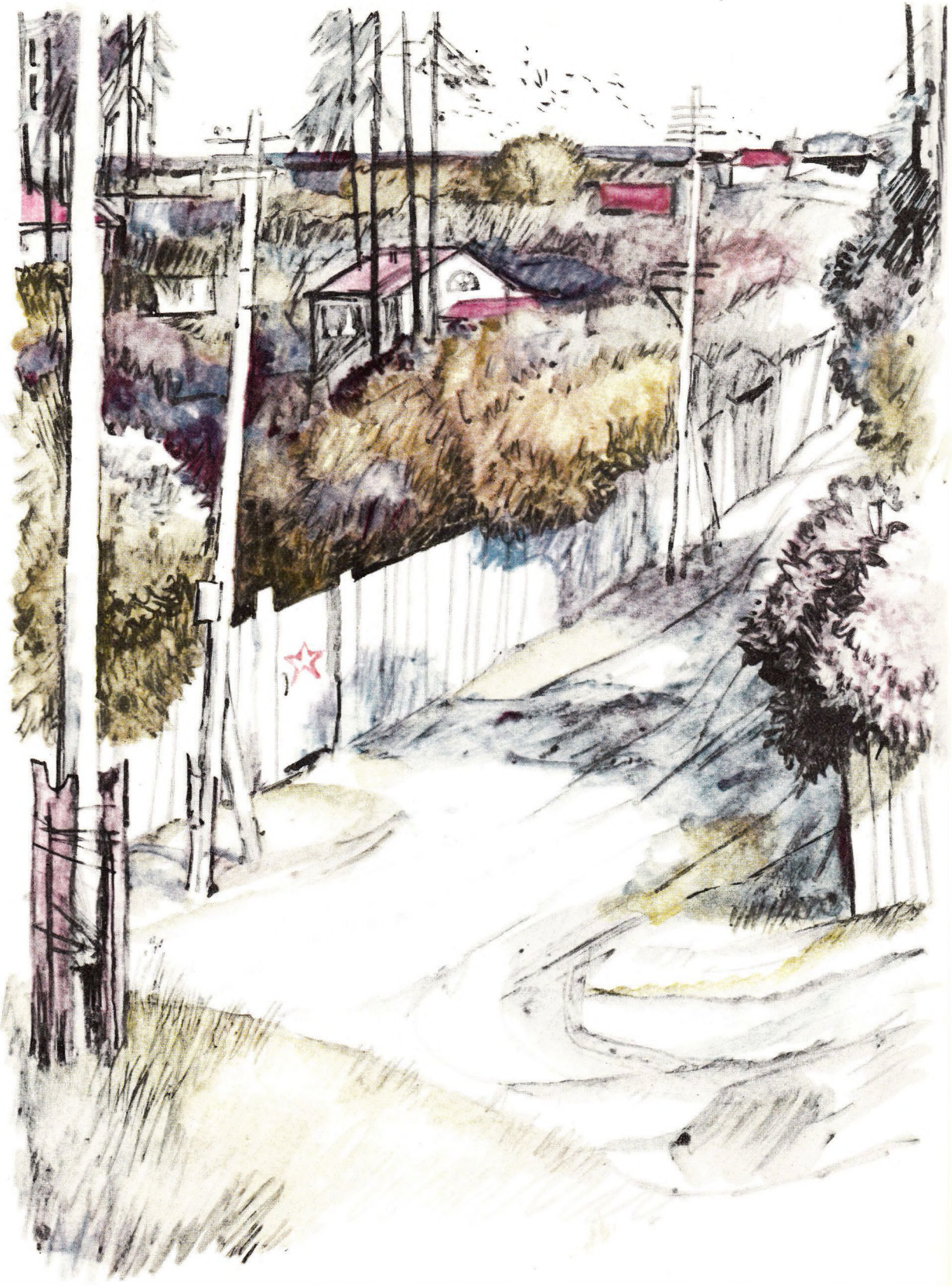
"Captured it," I answered softly.

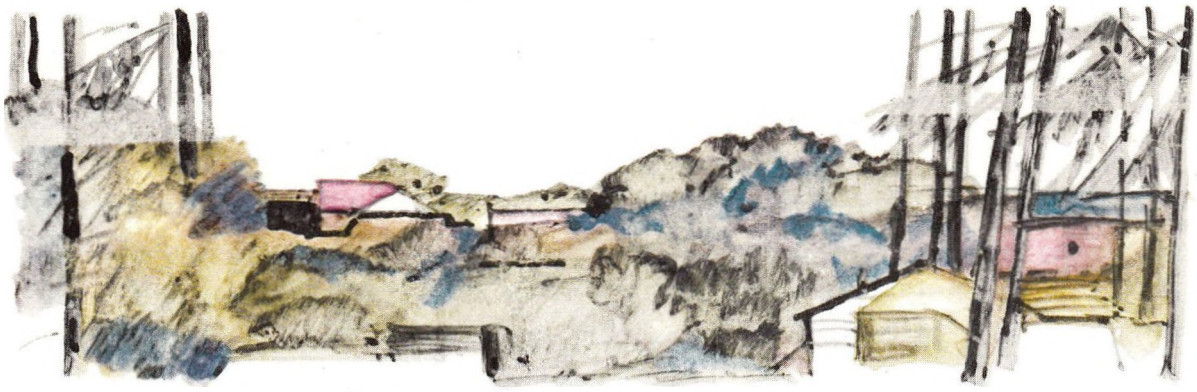
He hugged the broken young tree still harder, looked at me with a calm dying smile and slowly dropped his head onto a quivering bush.

A light winked and swayed. There came the low sad sound of a horn. The stretcher-bearers were coming.

1930

TIMUR AND HIS TEAM





It was all of three months since Colonel Alexandrov, the commanding officer of an armoured unit, left home. Presumably, he was with his unit. In the middle of the summer he sent a wire home advising his daughters Olga and Zhenya to spend the rest of their vacation in the country near Moscow.

Zhenya stood leaning on the handle of her broom in front of Olga, her print head-scarf pushed back, and scowled as her sister issued instructions:

"I'll take the things down in a lorry and you clean up the flat. It's no use frowning and pouting. When you leave, lock the door. Return the books to the library. Don't go dropping in to say goodbye to all your girl friends but go straight to the station. From there you will send Daddy this telegram. Then take the train and come straight to the country house. Zhenya, you must do as I tell you. I'm your sister..."

"And I'm yours."

"Quite right, but I'm older than you — and besides, it's what Dad told us to do."

When Zhenya heard the engine of the lorry start up in the yard, she heaved a sigh and glanced around the room. Complete disorder met her eyes. She went up to the dusty mirror in which was reflected the portrait of her father on the opposite wall.

All right, then! Granted Olga was older and had to be obeyed for the time being! But it was she, Zhenya, who had her father's nose and mouth and eyebrows. And, most likely, it would turn out to be she who had inherited his character too.

She tightened the knot of her kerchief, kicked off her sandals and picked

up a duster. Then she whisked the cloth off the table, set a pail under the tap, grabbed the broom and swept a pile of rubbish toward the door.

Soon the oil stove was spluttering and the primus buzzing. The floor was flooded with water. Soapsuds frothed in the zinc washtub.

And, outside, passersby gaped up at a barefoot girl in a red apron-dress standing fearlessly on a third-floor windowsill cleaning a wide-open window.

The lorry sped along the broad, sun-flooded road. Olga sat in the back in a wicker chair, resting her feet on a suitcase and leaning against a soft bundle. On her lap a tawny kitten was playing with a bunch of cornflowers.

At the 20th milepost they were overtaken by a motorised column. The soldiers, who sat in rows on wooden benches, the muzzles of their rifles pointed skyward, were singing lustily.

At the sound of the singing the doors and windows of cottages were thrown wide open. Excited children tumbled out over fences and through gates. They waved and cheered, throwing the men half-ripe apples, and before the column disappeared from view started games of soldiers, cutting their way through thick tangles of weeds and nettles in dashing cavalry charges.

The lorry turned off into a sprawling holiday estate and came to a stop in front of a small wooden house with ivy-covered walls. The driver and his assistants let down the sideboards and began to unload. Olga opened the door of the glassed-in porch.

From here there was a view of a rambling, neglected garden. At the farther end of the garden stood a ramshackle two-storey shed flying a small red flag.

Olga returned to the lorry. Here, a spry old lady, the milkwoman from next door, popped up at her elbow. She had come to offer to scrub out the cottage and to clean the windows.

While the neighbour was making ready her mops and pails, Olga picked up the kitten and strolled out into the garden.

Warm blobs of resin glistened on the trunks of the cherry trees. A pungent aroma of currants, moon daisies and wormwood filled the air. The mossy roof of the shed was full of holes, and through these holes

taut strings ran out and disappeared into the foliage of the nearby trees.

Olga pushed through a clump of hazels, and paused to brush a cobweb from her face.

What was that? The red flag was gone from the pole on the roof of the shed.

Now Olga caught the sound of rapid, anxious whispering. Suddenly, the heavy ladder propped up against the window of the loft toppled over, breaking some dry branches in its fall and crushing the burdock as it thumped against the ground.

The taut strings leading out through the roof began to quiver. The frightened kitten scratched Olga's hands as it somersaulted into the nettles. Bewildered, Olga stopped, glanced around and listened intently. But neither up the trees, nor beyond the fence, nor behind the dark window of the loft was there anything to be seen or to be heard.

She returned to the porch.

"It's them children up to their tricks again," the milkwoman informed Olga. "Yesterday they shook all the apples off two trees in our neighbour's garden, and broke some branches off a pear tree too. Awful brats they are — regular hoodlums. I saw my boy off to the Army the other day, dearie. He didn't so much as touch a drop before he went. 'Goodbye, Mum,' he says, and off he goes whistling, the darling. Towards evening I began to feel sorry for myself, like one does, and so I had a good cry. I woke up in the night feeling as if somebody was snooping around in the yard. 'Well,' I says to myself, 'here I am all alone in the world now, with not a soul to stand up for me...' It doesn't take much to finish off an old woman like me, you know. A knock on the head with a brick — and that's the end of me. God was merciful, though, and nothing was stolen. They snooped and scratched around a bit and then they made off. I had a barrel standing in the yard — made out of oak it is, takes three men to shift it — well, this barrel had been shoved off all of twenty yards towards the gate. And that's all the story. Who it was and what they wanted I have no idea!"

At twilight, when the house was all cleaned and tidied, Olga stepped out onto the porch. Carefully, she took a white accordion, her father's birthday

gift, from its leather case, placed it on her knee, fastened the strap over her shoulder and began to pick out the tune of a song she had recently heard:

Ah, if only just this once
You would come back safe to me!
Ah, if only just this — once...
And the next time...
And again...
But you'll never understand
Flying fast above the land
How long and slow is the waiting for your plane!
Ah!
Airmen all and pilots! Bombers all and fighters!
Now you've taken off for far away.
When will you come back to me?
I cannot tell when it will be.
Only — come back! Any time — on any day...

As she sang Olga glanced up warily every now and again at a dark clump of bushes near the fence.

Then she rose abruptly, faced the bushes and said in a loud voice: "Look here! Why are you hiding there and what do you want?"

A man in an ordinary white suit emerged from behind the bushes. He inclined his head and replied politely:

"I'm not hiding. I'm a bit of a singer myself. I didn't want to disturb you so I stood and listened."

"Yes, but you could have stood and listened from the road. Why did you have to climb over the fence?"

"Me? Climb over the fence?" The man was obviously offended. "I beg your pardon, but I'm not a cat. There's a gap in the fence over there, and I squeezed through it."

"I see," said Olga ironically. "Over *there*, however, is the gate. Perhaps you will be good enough to squeeze back into the street through it."

The man did as he was told. Without a word he walked through the gate and bolted it behind him. This pleased Olga.

"Just a moment!" she called, coming down the steps. "Did you say you were a singer?"

"No," he replied. "I'm an engineer, but in my spare time I sing in the operatic society at our works."

"I say," Olga suggested suddenly as though it were the most natural thing in the world. "Would you mind seeing me to the station? I'm expecting my younger sister. It's quite late and dark already and there's no sign of her. I'm not afraid of anyone, but I don't know my way around here yet. Wait a moment, though! What are you opening the gate for? You can wait for me outside!"

She put the accordion away, threw a shawl over her shoulders and stepped out into the dark street that was scented with dew and flowers.

Olga hardly spoke to her companion because she was angry with Zhenya. He told her his name was Georgi Garayev and that he worked at a motor works.

Two trains went by, and still no Zhenya. Then the third and last train came and went.

"You can't imagine the trouble that kid causes me!" Olga exclaimed. "If I were forty, or at least thirty, then it would be different. But she's thirteen and I'm eighteen, and she just won't do anything I tell her."

"No need to be forty!" Georgi said firmly. "Eighteen's much better! And there's nothing to worry about; your sister'll come tomorrow morning."

The platform emptied out. Georgi took out his cigarette-case, and at once two tough-looking youngsters swaggered up to him, cigarettes in hand, and stood waiting for a light.

"Young man," said Georgi, striking a match and holding it close to the older boy's face. "Before asking for a light you ought to say 'hello'. I've already had the honour of making your acquaintance in the park where you were so diligently pulling a board out of a new fence. Your name's Mikhail Kvakin, isn't it?"

The boy backed away. Georgi blew out the match and offered Olga his arm to walk her home.

When they were out of earshot the second boy stuck his soiled cigarette behind his ear and drawled:

"Who's that agitator? He from hereabouts?"

"Uh-hu," Kvakin said wryly. "That's Timur Garayev's uncle. We ought to get hold of Timur and punch his nose for him. He's gone and got a gang together and it looks like they're out to get us."

Just then the boys caught sight of an old gentleman under the lamp-post at the end of the platform. He was walking down the steps leaning on his stick.

The man was Doctor Kolokolchikov, a local resident. They rushed after him asking loudly for matches. The old gentleman did not seem to like their looks or their manners, for he turned round and brandished his gnarled stick at them. Then he continued sedately on his way.

Zhenya did not have time to send the wire to her father from the station in Moscow, so when she got off the train she decided to look for the local post office.

She sauntered through an old park, gathering harebells, and did not notice how she came out to a crossing of two roads bounded by gardens. The deserted appearance of the place clearly indicated that this was not the part of the estate that she had been looking for.

Not far away she saw a small, agile girl who was pulling a stubborn goat along by the horns and cursing it roundly in the process.

"Hey, will you tell me the way to the post office please?" Zhenya called out to her.

But just then the goat wrenched free, tossed its horns and started across the park at a gallop with the wailing girl in hot pursuit. Zhenya looked around her: dusk was falling and not a soul in sight. She opened a gate at random and walked up the path to the porch of a grey, two-storey house.

"Can you please tell me," Zhenya addressed the closed door in a loud but very polite voice, "how to get from here to the post office?"

There was no reply. She stood there for a while thinking, then opened the door, entered the hall and walked into a room. Nobody seemed to be at home. Feeling rather guilty, the turned to go out again but was brought up short by the noiseless appearance of a large, tawny dog from under the table. The dog studied the flustered girl for several moments and then, with a low growl, draped itself across the threshold.

"Don't be silly!" Zhenya cried, spreading out her fingers in fear. "I'm not a burglar! I haven't taken anything! Look, this is the key to our flat, and this is the telegram for Dad. My father's an officer, understand?"

The dog did not stir. Zhenya, edging her way surreptitiously toward the open window, went on:

"See? Just you stay where you are. You're a nice doggie, so clever and sweet."

But the moment Zhenya touched the windowsill the sweet doggie leapt up with such a snarl that she took a flying leap onto the sofa and sat there with her legs tucked up underneath her.

"You're a nice one," she said, on the verge of tears. "You go ahead and catch burglars and spies, if you like, but I'm a — I'm a human being. Yes!" She stuck out her tongue at the dog and added: "Idiot!"

Zhenya put the key and telegram on the edge of the table near the sofa. There was nothing to do but to wait for the owners of the house.

One hour passed, and then another... It grew quite dark. Through the open window drifted the whistling of distant trains, the barking of dogs and the thud of a volleyball. Somewhere, someone was strumming a guitar. Only here, in the grey house, everything was desolate and still.

Zhenya propped her head against the hard arm-rest of the sofa and began to cry quietly.

In the end, she fell fast asleep.

When she awoke it was already morning.

The luxuriant rain-washed foliage rustled in the wind outside the window. A pump handle creeked nearby. She could hear the rasping of a saw. But inside the house it was as quiet as before.

Zhenya found that her head was now resting on a soft leather cushion and her legs had been covered with a sheet. The dog was gone.

That must mean somebody had been here during the night!

Zhenya sprang up, tossed back her hair, straightened her crumpled frock, picked up her key and the unsent telegram and was about to make off when she noticed a slip of paper on the table. On it was written in large letters with a blue pencil:

"When you leave see you give the door a good bang." The note was signed "Timur".

Timur? Who was Timur? She ought to find him and thank him.

She took a look into the next room. Here, she saw a desk with a writing set, an ashtray and a small mirror on it. To the right lay a battered old revolver, and a pair of leather driving gloves. Propped against the desk was a curved Turkish sabre in a scratched and much worn scabbard. Zhenya put down her key and telegram, touched the sabre, drew it out of its scabbard and, brandishing the naked blade above her head, observed the effect in the mirror.

Her appearance was quite formidable. It would be wonderful to have her picture taken that way and then show it around at school! She could say that her father had once taken her to the front with him. The revolver would look better still in her left hand. Like this. She knitted her brows as far as they would go, compressed her lips, aimed at the mirror and pressed the trigger.

The room rang with a deafening report. A cloud of smoke veiled the windows. The mirror fell on top of the ashtray. Forgetting the key and telegram on the desk, Zhenya shot out of the room and fled from this weird and dangerous house as fast as her legs could carry her.

Before she knew it she found herself at the bank of a stream. Now she had neither the key to their flat, nor the telegram, nor a receipt for the telegram. And now she would have to tell Olga everything: about the dog, about sleeping in the empty house, about the Turkish sabre, and, finally, about the shot. What rotten luck! If Dad were there he would understand. But Olga wouldn't. Olga would be cross or, even worse, would cry. And that would be awful. Zhenya could cry too — when in the mood. But when she saw Olga in tears she always felt like taking refuge on top of a telegraph pole or a tall tree or a chimney.

Zhenya had a swim to cheer herself up and then went slowly off in search of their house.

Olga was in the kitchen starting up the primus when Zhenya mounted the steps of the porch. When she heard the footsteps she swung around and fixed Zhenya with a mute, hostile gaze.

"Hello, Olga!" said Zhenya, stopping short on the top step and forcing a

smile. "Olga, you won't scold me, will you?"

"I certainly will!" Olga retorted without shifting her gaze from Zhenya's face.

"All right, do scold me then," Zhenya said meekly. "If you only knew what a strange adventure I've had! Olga, please don't twitch your eyebrows; nothing terrible's happened. I only lost the key to the flat and didn't send off the wire to Dad."

Zhenya shut up her eyes and gulped, ready to tell the whole story in one breath.

But just then the front gate flew open with a bang and a shaggy nanny-goat, covered with burs, came charging in with lowered horns, followed closely by the wailing barefoot girl whom Zhenya had met the previous day.

Seizing the opportunity to postpone the ticklish explanation Zhenya dashed into the garden to chase out the nanny-goat.

She overtook the panting girl just as she had got a grip on the nanny-goat's horns.

"Have you lost anything?" the girl asked rapidly through clenched teeth without pausing in her immediate occupation of kicking and pummeling the nanny-goat.

"No," Zhenya replied, puzzled.

"Then whose is this? Not yours?" The girl showed her the key to the Moscow flat.

"Yes, that's mine," whispered Zhenya, glancing apprehensively back at the porch.

"Here, take the key, this note and the receipt. Your telegram's already been sent," said the girl, still speaking quickly through clenched teeth.

Then, thrusting a small paper package into Zhenya's hand, she struck the nanny-goat with her clenched fist.

The animal bolted toward the gate, and the barefoot girl darted after it, heading straight through a patch of thorns and stinging nettles. They shot out of the gate and were gone.

Zhenya opened the package, hunching her shoulders as though it were she and not the goat who had taken a beating.

"Here's the key. And a receipt for the telegram. That means somebody sent it off. But who? Ah, this must be the note. What *does* it all mean?"

The note, written in large letters with a blue pencil, read:

"No need to be afraid of anyone at home. Everything's fine and I won't tell." It was signed "Timur".

As if in a trance, Zhenya quietly tucked the note into her pocket. Then she squared her shoulders and calmly went back to Olga.

Olga was still standing in the same place by the unlit primus, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Olga!" Zhenya cried remorsefully. "I was only joking. Don't be cross with me! I cleaned the whole flat and the windows too. I really worked hard. I washed all the dusters and scrubbed the floors. Here's the key and here's the receipt for Dad's wire. Now let me give you a kiss — you know how much I love you! Want me to jump from the roof into the nettle patch for you?"

Without waiting for Olga to reply, Zhenya hugged her.

"Yes, yes — but I was so worried," Olga said in desperation. "You're always making the most pointless jokes. And Dad told me — stop it, Olga! Zhenya, for goodness' sake, my hands are all covered with kerosene! Look, Zhenya, suppose you pour some milk into the saucepan and put it on the stove to boil."

"I — I can't help making jokes," Zhenya muttered while Olga walked over to the washstand.

She placed the pot of milk on the primus, felt for the note in her pocket, and said:

"Olga, does God exist?"

"No," replied Olga, lowering her face to the faucet.

"Well, who is it up there, then?"

"Leave me alone!" Olga exclaimed impatiently. "There isn't anybody!"

Zhenya was silent for a moment and then resumed:

"Olga, who is Timur?"

"He's not God, he was a king," replied Olga grudgingly as she soaped her hands and face. "A cruel, lame king out of the Middle Ages."

"But if this Timur isn't a king and isn't cruel and isn't out of the Middle Ages, then who is he?"

"In that case I don't know. Leave me alone! What's all this about Timur anyway?"

"Because I have a kind of feeling that he's a person I love very much indeed."

"Who is?" Olga raised an incredulous, lathered face. "What nonsense

are you talking? Why must you always be making things up? Why can't you let me wash in peace! Just wait till Dad comes home. He'll see about this love of yours!"

"Will he, how?" Zhenya cried with feeling. "Even if he does come, it won't be for long. And he certainly wouldn't mistreat anybody so lonely and defenceless."

"Who's lonely and defenceless?" Olga asked in surprise. "You? Oh, Zhenya, I really don't know what to make of you; I can't imagine who you take after!"

Zhenya lowered her head. Staring at her reflection on the nickel-plated surface of the tea kettle, she replied proudly and without hesitation:

"After Dad. Just Dad. Him and him only. And after no one else in the world."

The elderly gentleman, Doctor Kolokolchikov, was sitting in his garden tinkering with a wall clock.

In front of him stood his grandson Kolya with a doleful expression on his face.

Kolya was supposed to be helping his grandfather. Actually, however, he had been holding a screwdriver in readiness for more than an hour, waiting for his grandfather to ask for it.

But the steel spring which had to be pressed back into place was proving stubborn, and his grandfather was very patient. And it seemed there would be no end to Kolya's waiting. It was just too silly, especially since Sima Simakov's tousled head had already bobbed up several times over the fence, and Sima was a fellow who always knew everything that was going on. And this same Sima was making such strange and mysterious signs at Kolya with his tongue, head and hands that even Kolya's five-year-old sister Tata, who was sitting under a linden tree trying to stuff a bur into the mouth of a sprawling dog, suddenly let out a scream and jerked her grandfather by the trousers. At this Sima Simakov's head instantly disappeared.

At long last the spring was properly installed.

"Man must toil," observed the grey-haired gentleman Kolokolchikov raising his moist forehead and addressing Kolya. "You've no call to look as though I'd been giving you a dose of castor oil. Give me the screwdriver

and take the pliers. Toil is ennobling. And nobility of character is just what you lack, my boy. Yesterday, for example, you had four helpings of ice cream and didn't share any with your little sister."

"She's lying, the shameless little brute!" cried Kolya indignantly. He glared at Tata. "I let her have two bites three times. And she goes and tells on me and takes four kopeks off Mum's table as she goes."

"And you climbed out of the window on a rope last night," Tata announced imperturbably, without turning her head. "And you've got a torch under your pillow. And yesterday a bad boy threw stones through our bedroom window. He kept on and on — throwing stones and whistling, throwing stones and whistling."

Kolya gasped at this base treachery on the part of the shameless Tata. He began to tremble from head to foot. Fortunately his grandfather was too occupied to pay attention to such dangerous slander, or else he simply had not heard. Luckily, too, the milkwoman came into the garden with her cans at that moment. Pouring out the milk, she lamented:

"Can you imagine, dear doctor, some burglars got into the yard and tried to steal my oak barrel last night! And people say that two fellows were seen on my roof early this morning: sitting on the chimney, mind you, and dangling their legs, the scoundrels."

"On the chimney? Why should they do that, pray?" inquired the puzzled gentleman.

But at that moment an ear-splitting clanging and jangling issued from the chicken coop. The screwdriver jolted in the old gentleman's hand and the capricious spring took advantage of this opportunity to pop out and hit the roof with a bang. Everybody, even Tata and the lazy dog, spun round at once, wondering what it could be. Without uttering a word Kolya scampered off across the carrot patch like a hare and disappeared behind the fence.

He halted near a cow shed from which, as from the chicken coop, was issuing the sound of sharp, clanging blows; it sounded as if somebody were hitting a section of steel rail with a hammer. Here he ran into Sima Simakov and asked him excitedly:

"I say, what's up? Is that the alarm?"

"No! I reckon it's No. I general rallying signal."

They scaled the fence and dived through a hole in the paling of the park, where they bumped into a sturdy, broad-shouldered chap named

Geika. Vasili Ladygin showed up next, and after him several others. Swiftly and noiselessly they sped toward their destination along paths known to them alone, exchanging clipped phrases as they ran:

"Is that the alarm?"

"Nope. It's No. I general rally."

"What rally? This isn't 'three-stop, three-stop'. It's some lunatic wheeling off ten at a time!"

"All right, we'll see."

"Sure, we'll check up!"

"Come on! Full speed ahead!"

As all this was going on, a tall, dark-haired boy of about thirteen was standing in the living-room of the house where Zhenya had spent the night. He was wearing black trousers and a dark blue sleeveless shirt with a red star embroidered in front.

A shaggy, grey-haired old man came in. His coarse linen shirt was threadbare and his baggy trousers were covered with patches. A roughly made wooden leg was strapped to his left knee. In one hand he held a piece of paper, and in the other he was clutching a battered old revolver.

"'When you leave see you give the door a good bang,'" he read out derisively. "Well, perhaps you'll let me know who slept here on the sofa last night?"

"A girl I know," the boy replied reluctantly. "I wasn't at home and the dog wouldn't let her leave."

"That's a lie!" said the old man testily. "If you knew her you'd have written her name on the note."

"When I wrote it I didn't know her name. Now I do."

"You didn't know it? And you went off in the morning leaving her all by herself? My dear boy, you're obviously not a hundred per cent, and it's high time you were put in the loonybin. That good-for-nothing girl broke the mirror and chipped the ashtray. It was a good thing the revolver was charged with blanks. What if they had been real bullets?"

"But Uncle — you don't keep real bullets, because your enemies' sabres and rifles are — only wood, after all."

A suggestion of a smile flitted across the old man's face. But he tossed back his shaggy head and said sternly:

"Better look out! I notice everything, I can see you're up to some monkey business, and if you don't take care I'll send you back to your mother."

The old man stumped upstairs. As soon as he was gone the boy jumped up, grabbed the front paws of the dog, which came trotting in just then, and kissed it on the nose.

"Well, Rita! We didn't get away with it, this time! It's okay, though. He's in a good mood today. He'll start singing in a minute."

And that was exactly what happened. The old man upstairs cleared his throat, let out a trial tra-la-la, and then began to sing in a low baritone:

Three nights I've kept my wearing watch. I peer
Into the dismal dark and always seem to hear
Muffled, suspicious sounds...

"Stop that, you mad dog!" Timur cried. "You'll tear my trousers! Where are you trying to drag me?"

A moment later, however, he slammed the door of the staircase leading up to his uncle's room and raced after the dog down the hallway and out onto the veranda. In a corner of the veranda, near a small telephone, a little bronze bell attached to a cord was jerking and banging against the wall.

The boy put his hand over the bell and wound the cord around a nail. Then the cord stopped jerking and slackened — it had probably broken somewhere along the line. Angry and baffled, he picked up the receiver.

An hour earlier, Olga had been sitting at a table with a physics textbook before her.

Zhenya had come in and picked up a little bottle of iodine.

"Zhenya," Olga had said severely. "How did you come by that scratch on your shoulder?"

"Oh, I was walking along," Zhenya answered carelessly, "and something prickly or sharp got in my way. That's how it happened."

"Why doesn't anything prickly or sharp get in my way?" Olga mocked.

"Well, it does! There's a maths exam in *your* way. That's both prickly and sharp. Watch out you don't get scratched! Olga, don't you be an engineer, be a doctor," Zhenya chattered on, shoving a small mirror in front of her

sister's face. "Just take a look at yourself: what sort of an engineer would you make? An engineer ought to be like this — this — and this." (She made three faces.) "And you look like this — this — and this." Zhenya rolled her eyes, arched her eyebrows and smiled sweetly.

"Silly!" Olga said, hugging and kissing her sister and then gently pushing her away. "Go away, Zhenya, and don't bother me. You'd be more useful if you fetched some water from the well."

Zhenya took an apple from a plate and retreated to a corner, where she stood gazing out of the window for several minutes. Then she opened the accordion case and said:

"You know what, Olga? Someone came up to me today — not bad-looking, blond, white suit — and said, 'What's your name, little girl?' 'Zhenya,' I said."

"Zhenya, stop bothering me and leave that instrument alone," Olga said without turning round or raising her eyes from the book.

"'And your sister's name,'" Zhenya continued, tugging at the accordion, "'is Olga, I believe?'"

"Zhenya, stop bothering me and leave that instrument alone!" Olga repeated, beginning to listen in spite of herself.

"'Your sister plays very well,' he said. 'Does she intend to study at the Conservatory?'" (Zhenya was dragging the accordion out of its case and fixing the strap over her shoulder.) "'No,' I told him. 'She's specialising in reinforced concrete.' Then he said, 'Oh!'" (Zhenya pressed one of the keys.) "So I said, 'Boo!'" (Zhenya pressed another key.)

"You horrid child! Put that instrument back at once!" Olga cried, jumping up. "Who gave you permission to speak to strange men?"

"All right, I'll put it away," Zhenya said huffily. "It wasn't me who spoke to him. It was he who spoke to me. I was going to tell you the rest, but now I won't. You just wait till Dad comes home, he'll show you!"

"Me? It's you he'll show. You won't let me do any work."

"No, you!" Zhenya cried, picking up an empty pail and flying out onto the porch. "I'll tell him how you send me running for kerosene, soap and water a hundred times a day! I'm not a lorry, or a horse, or a tractor either!"

Zhenya brought in the pail of water and set it on a bench, but since Olga did not even look up from the book, she went out into the garden, a pout on her face.

She strolled over to the little green clearing in front of the old

two-storey shed, took a sling out of her pocket and, stretching the rubber band, shot a tiny cardboard parachutist up into the air.

Soaring upside down, the parachutist turned a somersault and a little blue paper parachute popped open over his head. But just then a gust of wind bore him into the blackness of the loft window.

A casualty! Something had to be done to save the little cardboard man. Zhenya ran round the shed, from the roof of which taut strings stretched in all directions. She set the rickety ladder back against the window, climbed it and jumped down onto the floor of the loft.

How strange! The loft appeared to be inhabited! On one of the walls were hanging some twists of twine, a lantern, two crossed signalling flags and a map of the estate marked with mysterious signs. In a corner lay a pile of straw covered with sacking, and an upturned soap box.

A large wheel that looked like a ship's helm was sticking out from the wall near the mossy sieve of a roof. Above it hung a home-made telephone.

Zhenya peered through a crack in the wall. Outside, the foliage of the overgrown gardens stretched rippling like a sea and pigeons were frolicking in the sky. Zhenya decided to make the pigeons seagulls and the old shed with its ropes, lanterns and flags — a big ship. She'd be the captain.

It was great fun. She turned the wheel. The taut strings began to vibrate and hum, the wind whistled and whipped up the green waves. It seemed just as though her "ship" were slewing slowly and majestically through the waves.

"Helm to port!" she commanded loudly and put her weight on the heavy wheel.

Just then a few straight and narrow shafts of sunlight broke through the holes in the roof and fell on her face and frock. But Zhenya understood that these rays were the searchlights of enemy vessels trying to pick her out and decided to give battle.

Wrenching the creaking wheel, she manoeuvred to right and left, imperiously rapping out her commands.

Soon the sharp searchlight beams paled and died out. That, of course, did not mean that the sun had hidden behind a cloud. It meant that the routed enemy squadron was going to the bottom.

The battle was over. Zhenya wiped her forehead with a dusty palm. Suddenly the telephone rang. Zhenya had not expected that — she had thought it was a toy telephone. She began to feel uneasy. She picked up the

receiver. A sharp voice came through.

"Hullo! Hullo! Who's there? Who's the silly ass who's breaking the wires and sending out stupid, incomprehensible signals?"

"It's not an ass," Zhenya muttered in confusion. "It's me, Zhenya."

"You crazy girl!" the voice exclaimed with a suggestion of very real anxiety. "Leave the wheel alone and run for your life! They'll come piling in at any moment and knock your head off!"

Zhenya dropped the receiver, but it was too late. A head popped through the window — Geika's — and then Sima Simakov, Kolya Kolokolchikov and the others all tumbled in one after another.

"Who are you?" asked Zhenya, backing away from the window in fright. "Go away! This is our garden. I didn't ask you to come."

But a silent, compact wall of boys advanced shoulder to shoulder on Zhenya. Cornered, Zhenya let out a scream.

At that moment yet another shadow darkened the window. The boys turned and opened ranks, and Zhenya found herself face to face with a tall, dark-haired boy in a blue, sleeveless shirt with a red star embroidered in front.

"Less noise, Zhenya!" he said loudly. "You mustn't shout. No one's going to hurt you. We know each other, you and me. I'm Timur."

"You're Timur?!" exclaimed Zhenya incredulously, opening wide her tear-filled eyes. "You mean it was you who covered me with a sheet last night? Who left the note on the table? Who sent off the wire to Dad and had the key and receipt brought to me? But why did you do it? How do you know who I am?"

At this he came across to her, took her hand and said:

"You'd better stay here with us now. Sit down and listen, and then you'll understand everything."

The boys settled themselves on the sack-covered straw around Timur, who had spread out in front of him the map of the estate.

A lookout was stationed on a rope swing suspended in front of a hole in the wall above the window. From his neck dangled a pair of dented opera glasses.

Zhenya sat not far from Timur and gave all her attention to the proceed-

ings of the conference of this top-secret headquarters. Timur was speaking:

"At daybreak tomorrow, while everybody is still asleep, Kolokolchikov and I will repair the lines she (he pointed to Zhenya) broke."

"He'll oversleep," gloomily interjected the bull-headed Geika, who was wearing a striped sailor's jersey. "He only wakes up for breakfast and lunch."

"That's a l-lie!" Kolya jumped up and stuttered. "I g-get up with the first r-ray of the sun."

"Well, I don't know which is the sun's first ray and which the second, but I do know he'll oversleep," Geika retorted stubbornly.

At this juncture the lookout on the swing whistled. The boys sprang to their feet.

A mounted artillery battalion was galloping down the road in a cloud of dust. The powerful horses, in heavy harness of leather and metal, were pulling along their green ammunition wagons and tarpaulin-covered cannon at a spanking pace.

The sun-tanned, weather-beaten postilions took the bend in dashing style without swaying in their saddles, and, one after another, the batteries disappeared into the woods. Soon, the entire unit was out of sight.

"They're headed for the station to board a train," Kolya explained importantly. "I can tell by their uniforms. I can tell when they're out on drill, on parade, or on anything else."

"You just keep your eyes open and your mouth shut!" Geika stopped him. "We've got eyes too. You know, boys, this windbag wants to run away to the Red Army!"

"You can't do that," Timur intervened. "It won't wash."

"Why not?" asked Kolya, flushing. "How come boys always used to run away to the front?"

"That was before! And now the officers and other bosses have strict orders to kick out all the kids."

"How do you mean, kick 'em out?" cried Kolya, turning a deeper red. "You mean — their own side?"

"That's right!" Timur heaved a sigh. "Their own side. And now, fellows, let's get down to business."

The boys resumed their places.

"Unidentified boys have been stealing apples from the garden of No. 34,

Crooked Lane," Kolya announced sullenly. "They broke two branches and trampled all over a flower bed."

"Whose house is that?" Timur glanced at his notebook. "It's Kryukov the soldier's. Now, which of you is an ex-specialist on other people's gardens and apple trees?"

"Me," muttered an embarrassed voice.

"Who could have done this job?"

"Kvakin and his assistant, the chap they call Figure. They picked out a tree on which Golden Sap apples grow."

"That Kvakin again!" Timur reflected a moment. "Geika! Did you talk to him?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"Got him on the jaw twice."

"What'd he do?"

"Well, he got me once or twice, too."

"All you can say is 'I got him and he got me.' And a fat lot of good it does! We'll make Kvakin a special case. Next?"

"The son of the old milkwoman who lives at No. 25 has been called up into the cavalry," a boy in the corner reported.

"Some piece of news!" Timur shook his head reproachfully. "We've had our sign on the gate for two days now. Who put it there — you, Kolokolchikov?"

"Yes."

"Then why is the upper left point of the star all wavy like a leech? If you take on a job, do it properly. People'll laugh when they see it. Next?"

Sima Simakov jumped up and rattled off his report: "A nanny-goat's been lost at No. 54, Pushkaryov Road. I was walking along when I saw an old woman beating a girl. I yelled out, 'Missis, beating's against the law!' She says, 'She's lost the nanny-goat, blast her hide!' 'Where was it lost?' 'Over there, in the gully back of the woods. Chewed through her rope and made off, you'd think the wolves'd clean swallowed it.'"

"Wait a minute! Whose house?"

"Pavel Guryev's — he's in the Army. The girl's his daughter. Her name is Nyura. It was her grandma who was beating her. Don't know her name. The nanny-goat's grey, with a black back. They call it Manka."

"Find that nanny-goat!" ordered Timur. "Take a squad of four — you,

and you, and you. Well, fellows, is that all?"

"There's a girl always crying at No. 22," Geika submitted reluctantly.

"Why does she cry?"

"I've tried asking her but she won't say."

"You ought to have asked her better. Perhaps someone beats her — or treats her badly."

"I asked her, but she wouldn't say."

"A big girl?"

"She's four."

"There's a real tragedy for you! If she were a person ... but — four years old! Just a moment though — whose house is that?"

"Lieutenant Pavlov's. The one who was killed at the frontier not long ago."

"'I've tried asking her but she won't say,'" Timur mocked, obviously disappointed in Geika. He frowned and thought a while. "All right. Leave that one to me."

"Kvakin's in sight!" cried the lookout. "He's walking down the other side of the street, eating an apple. Timur, let's send out a squad to give him the bumps!"

"No, remain where you are. I'll be back soon."

He climbed down the ladder and disappeared into the bushes. Now the lookout continued his running commentary:

"A good-looking girl just came into my field of vision. Name unknown. Standing at the gate with a jug and buying milk. She must be from the house."

"Is it your sister?" asked Kolya, tugging at Zhenya's sleeve. Receiving no answer, he warned her with an important and rather offended air: "Better not try calling to her from here."

"Shut up!" retorted Zhenya derisively, jerking her sleeve free. "I'm not having you ordering me about!"

"Better leave her alone," Geika teased Kolya, "or she'll clock you one."

"Who? Me?" Kolya was stung to the quick. "What's she got? Nothing but nails! Me, I've got real muscles. Here, look at these biceps! Feel that? And calves too!"

"She'll clock you one anyway — muscles or no muscles. Hey, fellows, watch out! Timur's going up to Kvakin."

Idly swinging a branch which he had broken off one of the trees, Timur

was making to cut across Kvakin's path.

Kvakin saw him and halted. His vacant features registered neither surprise nor fear.

"Hiya, Commissar!" he said quietly, cocking his head on one side. "Where you off to in such a hurry?"

"Hiya, Chief!" Timur replied in the same tone. "I was off to meet you."

"Glad to see you. Pity I haven't anything for you. Except this..." He fumbled in his shirt and produced an apple.

"Stolen?" saked Timur, biting into it.

"That's right," Kvakin said. "Golden Sap. Only trouble is, it's not really ripe yet."

"Sour as vinegar!" Timur made a face and tossed the apple away. "Look here: did you notice a sign like this on the fence of No. 34?" Timur pointed to the star embroidered on his blue shirt.

"Well, and what if I did?" Kvakin was on his guard. "Brother, I keep my eyes peeled day and night."

"Then take my advice, and when you see this sign anywhere, day or night, run like a scalded cat."

"Say, Commissar, you're a bit of a fire-eater!" drawled Kvakin. "That'll do — enough said."

"Say, Chief, you're a bit of a mule," answered Timur without raising his voice. "This is our last parley, so keep it in mind and pass it on to your gang."

Nobody watching this scene would have thought that those two were anything but the best of friends. So it was not surprising that Olga, standing at the gate with her milk jug, should have asked the milkwoman whether she knew the boy who was talking to that ruffian Kvakin.

"No, I don't," said the milkwoman vehemently. "I suppose he's just another one of them hoodlums. I've seen him hanging around your house lately. Watch out they don't go knocking your little sister about, dearie."

Olga was disturbed. She shot a hostile glance at the two boys, walked back to the porch, put away the jug of milk, locked the door and went out to look for Zhenya, who had not set foot in the house for more than two hours now.

On his return to the loft Timur told the boys about his talk with Kvakin. They decided to send the gang a written ultimatum the following day.

The boys climbed down noiselessly from the loft and ran back to their homes, some crawling through gaps in the fences, others clambering over them.

Timur turned to Zhenya.

"Well?" he said. "Is everything clear now?"

"Absolutely," she replied. "Only not quite. Make it simpler."

"All right, but first climb down and follow me. Your sister isn't at home now."

When they reached the ground Timur gave the ladder a push and sent it toppling over.

It was growing dark now, but Zhenya followed Timur with complete confidence.

They halted at the old milkwoman's house. Timur glanced around. There was no one in sight. He drew a tube of oil paint out of his pocket and went up to the gate. The upper left-hand point of the red star drawn on it was indeed all wavy like a leech.

He straightened the line with a steady hand and tapered the point nicely.

"What are you doing that for?" Zhenya asked. "Please tell me what it's all about."

Timur put the tube back in his pocket, wiped his stained finger with a burdock leaf, and, looking Zhenya straight in the face, said:

"That star means a man living in this house has gone to the Army. And that from now on this house is under our care and protection. Is your father in the Army?"

"Yes!" replied Zhenya with pride and deep feeling. "He's an officer."

"That means you come under our care and protection too."

They stopped at the gate of another cottage. There was a red star with a thick black border here.

"See that?" said Timur. "A man left this house for the Red Army, too, but he's dead. This is Lieutenant Pavlov's house; he was killed not long ago at the frontier. His wife and little daughter live here — and good old Geika wonders why the girl's always crying. If you get a chance, Zhenya, do something nice for her."

He said all this very simply, but cold shivers ran down Zhenya's back,

though the evening was quite warm.

She stood there silently, her head bent. Just for the sake of saying something, she asked:

"Is Geika really good?"

"Yes," said Timur. "His father is a sailor. He likes to take the mickey out of that swank Kolokolchikov, but he always sticks up for him just the same."

A peremptory, angry shout "Zhenya!" made them spin around. Olga was standing quite close behind them.

Zhenya touched Timur's hand. She wanted to lead him up to Olga and introduce him.

But a second call, stern and cold, made her think again.

Nodding apologetically to Timur, and shrugging her shoulders in bewilderment, Zhenya walked over to Olga.

"Zhenya!" said Olga, on the verge of tears, breathing heavily. "I forbid you to talk to that boy. Do you hear?"

"But Olga, why?" Zhenya muttered. "What's wrong?"

"I forbid you to associate with that boy," Olga repeated firmly. "You're thirteen and I'm eighteen. I'm your sister. I'm older than you. And when Dad left, he told me..."

"But, Olga, you don't understand a thing!" Zhenya cried in despair. She was trembling. She wanted to explain, to justify herself. But she could not. She did not have the right. She waved her hand hopelessly and did not say another word.

She went straight home to bed, but sleep would not come for a long time. And after she fell asleep she did not hear someone knock on the window in the night and deliver a telegram from her father.

At daybreak the shepherd blew his wooden horn. The old milkwoman opened her gate and drove her cow out to join the herd on the common. She had scarcely turned the corner when five boys jumped out from behind an acacia shrub and scuttled over to the well, trying not to make a clatter with their empty buckets.

"Pump it!"

"Let's have it!"

"There!"

"Take it!"

One after another, the boys rushed into the yard, cold water spilling on their bare feet as they ran, emptied their buckets into the oak barrel and dashed back to the well.

Timur ran up to Sima Simakov, who was wet from exertion, and asked:

"See Kolokolchikov anywhere? No? Then he has overslept. Hurry! The old woman'll be back any minute."

Timur stole into Kolokolchikovs' garden, stood under a tree and whistled. Without waiting for an answer he climbed the tree and peered into the room. All he could see from his perch was the end of a bed standing by the window and a pair of blanket-covered legs.

He threw a piece of bark onto the bed and called softly:

"Kolya, get up! Kolya!"

The sleeper did not stir. Then Timur pulled out his pocket-knife, sliced off a long, thin switch, sharpened the end and cast it into the window. He hooked the blanket and tugged.

The light blanket slipped out over the windowsill. A hoarse shout issued from the room.

His sleepy eyes almost starting out of his head, a greyhaired gentleman clad only in his pyjamas leapt from the bed and, grabbing the retreating blanket, rushed up to the window.

Finding himself suddenly face to face with this venerable old man, Timur dropped to the ground.

The old gentleman, however, flung the recaptured blanket onto his bed, snatched his double-barrelled gun off the wall, hastily put on his spectacles, poked the gun through the window and, pointing the muzzle skyward, closed his eyes and fired.

Timur was so frightened that he did not stop running until he reached the well. There had been a misunderstanding. He had taken the sleeper for Kolya, and the old gentleman had, naturallly, taken him for a burglar.

Just then Timur saw the milkwoman going through the gate with her water buckets.

He dived behind a clump of acacias and settled down to observe what would happen next.

When she returned from the well, the old woman lifted a bucket and poured the water into the barrel. The next moment she sprang aside,

because the water splashed back at her out of the already brimming barrel.

Gasping and peering round in bewilderment, the old woman inspected the barrel from all sides. She plunged her hand into the water and sniffed it. Then she hurried over to the porch to see if the lock on her door was in order. Then, finally, not knowing what to think, she tapped at her neighbour's window.

Timur laughed and came out of his hiding place. He had to hurry. The sun was already rising. Kolya had failed to turn up and the lines still had to be repaired.

As he made his way through the garden to the shed, Timur glanced into an open window which gave onto the garden.

Zhenya, dressed in shorts and a tee shirt, was writing at a table near her bed. She kept tossing back her hair impatiently from her face.

When Zhenya saw Timur, she made no sign of alarm or surprise. She only motioned to him not to wake Olga. Then she put her unfinished letter into a drawer and tiptoed out of the room.

When Zhenya heard about Timur's morning misadventure, she forgot all Olga's instructions and gladly volunteered to help him repair the lines which she herself had broken.

After they had finished the job and Timur was leaving, Zhenya said:

"I don't know why, but my sister absolutely hates you."

"There you are," said Timyr with chagrin. "And my uncle feels the same way about you!"

He was about to go but she stopped him.

"Wait a minute. You ought to comb your hair — you look frightfully shaggy this morning."

She got out her comb and was just handing it to him when Olga called out indignantly from the window:

"Zhenya! What *are* you doing?"

A moment later the two sisters stood facing each other on the porch.

"I don't choose your friends for you," Zhenya defended herself desperately. "What friends? Quite ordinary friends. In white suits. 'Oh, how wonderfully your sister plays!' Wonderfully! He ought to hear how

wonderfully you scold! See this! I'm writing all about everything to Dad!"

"Zhenya! That boy is a hoodlum and you're a little fool," said Olga coldly, trying to keep her temper. "Write to Dad if you like, but if I ever see you in that boy's company again we're leaving here and going back to Moscow at once. And you know I keep my word, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, you tyrant!" replied Zhenya with tears in her eyes. "I know it all too well!"

"And now read this," said Olga. She placed the telegram received the night before on the table and went out.

The telegram read:

"Stopping in Moscow few hours en route. Will wire date and time later. Dad."

Zhenya wiped her eyes, pressed the telegram to her lips and murmured:

"Daddy, please come soon! Dad, your Zhenya isn't getting on too well!"

Two cartloads of firewood were delivered to the house of the old woman who had spanked the spry little Nyura for losing the goat.

Grandma groaned and wheezed as she began to stack the logs, cursing the careless drivers who had just dumped them all anyhow. The work was too much for her. She was seized with a coughing fit and sat down on the steps to catch her breath. Then she picked up a watering can and hobbled off to her vegetable garden. The only person remaining in the yard was Nyura's three-year-old brother, a young man of evident energy and enterprise for, the moment Grandma was out of sight, he picked up a stick and began to beat out a tattoo on a bench and an upturned washtub.

At this Sima Simakov, who had been hunting for the runaway goat — which could have vied with a Bengal tiger in bounding over bushes and across gullies — left one of his men at the fringe of the wood and dashed into the yard at the head of the other four.

He stuffed a handful of wild strawberries into the youngster's mouth and stuck a shiny crow's feather into his hand while his squad began feverishly stacking the logs.

Sima Simakov himself ran off round the garden fence to detain Grandma

in the vegetable patch. He stopped at a place where a clump of cherry and apple trees grew close up to the fence and peeped through a chink.

He saw that Grandma had gathered an apronful of cucumbers and was about to go back.

He tapped softly on the boards of the fence.

Grandma gave a start. Then Sima picked up a stick and began to stir the branches of an apple tree with it.

Grandma thought she saw somebody climbing stealthily over the fence to steal apples. She dumped her cucumbers onto the ground, pulled up a great tuft of nettles, crept over to the fence and hid behind it.

Sima Simakov peeped through the hole again, but this time he could not see the old woman. Worried, he jumped up, caught hold of the top of the fence and began to pull himself up cautiously.

At that moment the old woman leaped out of her ambush with a triumphant whoop and lashed Sima across the hands with the nettles.

Wildly waving his hands, Sima dashed back to the gate, through which the other boys, now finished with their task, were running out.

Again, the yard was deserted but for the little boy. He picked up a chip of wood, put it on the edge of the woodstack, and then dragged over a piece of birch bark.

Grandma found him thus occupied when she came back from the vegetable garden. She stared with amazement at the neatly stacked logs.

"Who's been at work here while I was away?" she asked.

The youngster added his birch bark to the stack and said importantly:

"Can't you see, Grandma? It's me."

The milkwoman came into the yard and the two old women began to talk excitedly about the strange happenings with the water and wood. They tried to pump the youngster but they learned very little from him. He told them that some people had dashed into the yard, stuck sweet strawberries into his mouth, had given him a feather and even promised to catch him a hare with two ears and four legs. Then they had stacked the firewood and run away.

Nyura came into the yard.

"Nyura," said Grandma, "did you see who came into our yard just now?"

"No, I was looking for the nanny-goat," Nyura replied sourly. "Been running around all morning looking for her."

"They stole her!" Grandma wailed, turning to the milkwoman. "What a nanny-goat she was! Not a nanny-goat but a regular dove. A dove!"

"Some dove!" snorted Nyura, moving away from her Grandma. "When she starts tossing her horns you can't jump out of the way fast enough! Doves don't have horns."

"Hold your tongue, Nyura! Keep quiet, you silly good-for-nothing!" cried Grandma. "I'm not saying the goat wasn't a bit high-spirited. I wanted to sell the darling. And my dove has flown."

At that moment the gate flew open with a screech. Sweeping the ground with its horns, the nanny-goat galloped in and headed straight for the milkwoman. That good woman snatched up her heavy milk can and leaped onto the porch with a shriek and the nanny-goat ran into the wall of the house and came to a stop.

Everybody noticed then, that a board had been fastened to the animal's horns. On it was written:

I am a nanny-goat — beware!
A goat of note — take care!
Who Nyura would beat
Vengeance I'll wreak!

Meanwhile, at the corner beyond the fence, the boys, feeling very pleased with themselves, were laughing fit to split their sides.

Sima Simakov drove a stick into the ground and went galumphing round it in a wild dance, chanting proudly:

We are not a gang of roughs
Nor a rabble band.
We are disciplined and tough
And our pranks are planned.
Pioneers all are we!
Pioneers are we!

Then the boys darted off noiselessly like a flock of martins.

There was still plenty of work to do, but the chief thing now was to draw up an ultimatum and to send it to Mikhail Kvakin.

Nobody knew how to draw up an ultimatum, so Timur asked his uncle.

His uncle explained that each country had its own way of drawing up ultimatums but that courtesy obliged you to wind them up with the following words:

"Please accept, Mr. Minister, the assurance of my highest esteem."

After this the ultimatum should be tendered to the head of the hostile country by an accredited ambassador.

But this did not appeal to Timur or to any of the others. First of all, they had no intention of conveying any kind of esteem to that hoodlum Kvakin; secondly, they had neither a permanent ambassador nor even an envoy accredited to Kvakin's gang.

After discussing the point they decided to send a simpler ultimatum, like the one the Zaporozhye Cossacks sent the Turkish sultan. They had all seen Repin's picture of the Cossacks writing their letter and they had read about how the brave fellows fought the Turks, the Tatars and the Poles.

Behind the grey gate with the black-bordered red star in the shady garden of the house opposite the house where Olga and Zhenya were living, a fair-haired little girl was making her way down the gravel walk. Her mother, a young and pretty woman but tired and sad-looking, was sitting in a rocking chair near the window; on the sill stood a huge bouquet of wild flowers.

Before her lay a pile of open telegrams and letters — from relatives and friends, acquaintances and strangers.

The letters and telegrams were full of warm sympathy. They seemed to speak to her from a distance, like a forest echo, which calls nowhere and promises nothing, yet comforts the traveller with the knowledge that there are people close by and that he is not alone in the dark woods.

The fair-haired little girl stopped by the fence, holding her doll upside down so that its wooden arms and hempen braids trailed over the ground. A painted hare cut out of plywood was dangling from the top of the fence. The expression on its face was droll and rather sad. It was jerking one of its paws strumming a little balalaika.

Thrilled by this miraculous occurrence, which naturally seemed to her

strange and wonderful beyond compare, the little girl dropped her doll and ran up to the fence. The hare, apparently eager to please, dropped right into her hands! Zhenya's smiling face popped up from behind the fence.

The little girl looked up at Zhenya.

"Are you playing with *me*?" she asked.

"Yes. Would you like me to jump down?"

"There's some nettles here," the little girl warned her after thinking it over. "I stung my hand yesterday."

"That's all right," said Zhenya, jumping down. "I'm not afraid of it. Show me the nettle that stung your hand yesterday. This one? Well, just watch: I'll pull it up, and throw it down, and stamp on it and spit on it. All right? Now let's play. You have the hare and I'll have the doll."

From the porch Olga had noticed that Zhenya was hanging about near their neighbour's fence, but she did not want to interfere with her sister. There had been enough tears for one morning. But when Zhenya climbed over the fence into the neighbour's garden Olga began to worry. She left the house, crossed over to the gate and opened it.

Zhenya and the little girl were now standing at the window beside the woman, who was smiling as her daughter showed her how the funny, sad-looking rabbit played the balalaika.

Noting Zhenya's perturbed expression when her sister entered the garden, the woman guessed that Olga was displeased.

"Please don't be angry with her," she said quietly to Olga. "She's only playing with my little girl. This is a sad time for us..." The woman fell silent. "I've been crying my eyes out, while she" — the woman pointed to her tiny daughter and added almost in a whisper — "she doesn't even know that her father was killed at the frontier not long ago."

It was now Olga's turn to feel abashed, while Zhenya watched her from some way off with an expression of bitter reproach.

"And I'm all alone," the woman continued. "My mother lives far, far away in the taiga. My brothers are in the Army and I have no sisters."

The young woman put a hand on Zhenya's shoulder and pointed to the window.

"Was it you who put this bunch of flowers on my porch last night?" she asked.

"No," replied Zhenya without stopping to think. "It wasn't me. But I expect it was one of our..."

"One of our what?" Olga gave Zhenya a puzzled look.

"I don't know." Zhenya was frightened. "It wasn't me. I don't know anything about it. Look, somebody's coming."

Two air-force officers were climbing out of a car that had stopped in front of the house. They opened the gate and came striding up the garden path.

"They've come to see me," the woman said. "I know what it is: they're going to ask me again if it wouldn't be good for me to have a change, if I wouldn't like to go to the Crimea or to the Caucasus, to a sanatorium or to a holiday resort..."

The men touched their caps. The senior officer, a captain, must have caught her last words, for he said:

"No, neither to the Crimea, nor to the Caucasus, nor to a sanatorium, nor to a holiday resort. You wanted to see your mother, didn't you? Well, she's coming to pay you a visit. Leaving today from Irkutsk. She was brought to Irkutsk by a special plane."

"Who brought her?" the woman exclaimed in a happy and dazed voice. "You?"

"No," the captain replied. "Our comrades and yours."

The little girl came running up and looked boldly at the visitors; it was obvious that she was used to the blue uniform.

"Mummy," she said, "make me a swing and I'll go flying to and fro, to and fro. Far, far away, like Daddy."

"Oh, no, don't!" her mother cried. She picked up the little girl and hugged her tight. "No, no, never fly away as far... as your daddy."

On a daisy-covered green off Maly Ovrazhny Lane, behind the chapel whose peeling murals depicted stern, bearded old men and clean-shaven angels, and somewhat to the right of the picture of Judgement Day with its cauldrons, boiling oil and darting devils, Kvakin's gang was playing cards.

They had no money, and so they played for "back-breakers", "flicks" and "revive-the-stiff". The loser's eyes were bound, he was forced to lie on his back on the grass, and he was given a "candle", that

is, a long stick. With this stick he was supposed to repel his kind brethren, who out of pity for the dead man would do everything they could to revive him by energetically lashing at his bare shins, calves and heels with nettle.

The game was at its height when the shrill call of a bugle came from the other side of the fence.

Timur's envoys stood there.

Kolya Kolokolchikov, the staff trumpeter, gripped a shiny brass bugle in one hand, while the barefoot Geika, his face stern, held a big envelope made of wrapping paper.

"What kind of circus act is this?" asked the boy they called Figure, leaning over the fence. "Mikhail!" he yelled over his shoulder. "Drop the game, there's a sort of delegation here to see you!"

"Here I am," said Kvakin, hoisting himself up on the fence. "Hiya there, Geika! Who's that shrimp you've got with you?"

"Take this envelope," Geika handed over the ultimatum. "You have twenty-four hours to think it over. I shall come back for your answer at the same time tomorrow."

Touched on the raw at being called a shrimp, Kolya Kolokolchikov raised his bugle and, blowing out his cheeks, sounded a furious retreat. The two envoys then departed in a dignified silence under the inquisitive stares of the boys strung along the fence.

"What's this, anyway?" said Kvakin, fingering the envelope and looking at the gaping boys. "Here we were, minding our own business, and then bugles, threats! No, fellas, I can't make head or tail of it!"

He tore open the envelope and, perched as he was on the fence, began to read:

"'To Mikhail Kvakin, Chief of the Gang for the Mopping-up of Other People's Gardens.' That's me," he explained in a loud voice. "Full title and all the trimmings. 'And his,'" he continued, "'inglorious assistant Pyotr Pyatakov, otherwise known simply as Figure.' That's you," he explained with satisfaction to Figure. "Sounds good, 'inglorious'! Too high-sounding though, if you ask me; they could have called the fool something simpler. 'And likewise to all the members of their infamous band — an ul-ti-ma-tum.' What that is I don't know," announced Kvakin sarcastically. "Most likely a swearword of some sort."

"It's an international word. Means they're going to lash us," explained

the boy, who was standing next to Figure, a close-cropped lad called Alyosha.

"Then why don't they say so!" said Kvakin. "Now we come to Article One:

"'In consideration of the fact that you make night raids on the gardens of peaceful inhabitants, not sparing houses bearing our sign — a red star — or even those bearing the star with the black border of mourning, we order you, you cowardly scoundrels...'

"Can you beat it? Just listen to how they swear — the dogs!" continued Kvakin, forcing a smile. "And look at all the fancy words and commas! Boy!

"'We order you, Mikhail Kvakin, and that altogether inglorious individual, Figure, to appear at the place indicated by our messengers at a time not later than tomorrow morning, bringing with you a list of all the members of your infamous band.'

"'In the event of a refusal, we shall consider ourselves at liberty to take any further action we may think fit.'

"What do they mean — 'at liberty'?" Kvakin pondered. "We never locked them up anywhere, did we?"

"It's another of those international words. Means they're going to lash us," the close-cropped Alyosha explained again.

"Then why don't they say so?" Kvakin said with annoyance. "Too bad Geika's gone; looks like he hasn't cried for a long time."

"He won't cry," Alyosha said. "His brother's a sailor."

"So what?"

"His father was a sailor too. He won't cry."

"What's it to you, anyway?"

"My uncle's a sailor too."

"Cut it out, will you!" Kvakin flared up. "Father, brother, uncle, what's it all mean, anyway! Better let your hair grow, Alyosha — looks like you've got sunstroke. And what are *you* mumbling about?" he turned on Figure.

"We've got to catch those messengers tomorrow and give that Timur and his lot a licking," said Figure sullenly, nettled by the ultimatum.

They left it at that.

Withdrawing to the shade of the chapel, the chief and his assistant stopped by a painting depicting agile and muscular devils dragging howling

and resisting sinners towards the everlasting furnace. Kvakin asked Figure: "Look here, was that you in the garden where that girl lives, the one whose father was killed?"

"That's right. What about it?"

"You see, it's like this," Kvakin muttered glumly, poking his finger at the mural. "I don't give a damn for Timur's signs and I can make mincemeat of him any day..."

"Okay," agreed Figure. "So what're you poking your finger at the devils for?"

"Because," replied Kvakin with a crooked grin, "even though you're a pal of mine, Figure, you're not human, you're more like this dirty fat old beast of a devil."

In the morning three of the milkwoman's regular customers were not at home when she called to deliver the milk. It was too late for her to go to the market, so, lifting her milk can onto her shoulder, she set out on a round of the houses.

She trudged from door to door without success until she finally stopped to rest near Timur's house.

She heard a deep, pleasant voice singing in the yard. That meant the owners were in and she might have some luck there.

As she came through the gate the old woman sang out:

"Milk, anyone want milk here?"

"Two measures!" replied a bass voice.

Lowering her can to the ground, the milkwoman turned around and saw a grizzled and tattered old man come limping out from behind the bushes brandishing a sabre.

"I was saying, did you want any milk, sir?" the milkwoman asked, backing away in alarm. "Goodness me, how rough you look! What do you use that sabre for — to cut the grass?"

"Two measures. You'll find a jug on the table," the old man answered shortly and stuck the point of his sabre into the ground.

"You ought to buy a scythe, sir," the milkwoman continued, hastily pouring the milk into the jug and glancing warily at the old man, "and throw that sabre away. You might scare a simple body to death with a sabre like that."

"How much?" the old man asked, thrusting his hand into the pocket of his baggy trousers.

"The usual price," replied the milkwoman. "Two-eighty a litre. I don't overcharge."

The old man rummaged about in his pocket and produced a large, battered revolver.

"You can pay later," the milkwoman babbled, snatching up her can and making off. "Don't trouble yourself, dearie!" she went on, almost running now and glancing back over her shoulder. "I can wait for the money."

She hurried through the gate, slammed it shut and shouted out angrily from the lane:

"You ought to be put away, you old devil, and not left to run about loose. Yes, yes! Under lock and key is where you belong!"

The old man shrugged his shoulders, stuffed the three-ruble note which he had been holding ready back into his pocket and quickly hid the revolver behind his back, for Doctor Kolokolchikov, the elderly gentleman, was coming into the garden.

The doctor was stalking down the gravel walk with a serious and concentrated mien, leaning on his stick. When he caught sight of the eccentric old man he coughed, adjusted his spectacles and inquired:

"Can you tell me where I can find the owner of this house, my good man?"

"I live in this house," the old man replied.

"In that case," said the elderly gentleman, tipping his straw hat, "perhaps you can tell me whether a certain young lad, one Timur Garayev, is a relative of yours?"

"He is. That 'certain young lad' happens to be my nephew."

"It pains me very much indeed to tell you this," began the elderly gentleman, clearing his throat and looking askance at the sabre which was still sticking out of the ground where its owner had left it, "but yesterday morning your nephew attempted to rob our house."

"What? My Timur tried to rob your house?"

"Yes, just imagine!" continued the elderly gentleman, trying to see what it was the old man was hiding behind his back and beginning to get worked up. "He tried to steal my flannel blanket while I was asleep."

"Who? Timur? Stole your flannel blanket?" The old man was quite at

a loss. The hand holding the revolver involuntarily fell to his side.

The elderly gentleman was now visibly alarmed. Backing toward the gate with as much dignity as he could muster, he began to speak soothingly:

"Of course, I wouldn't swear to it, but still the facts — the facts! My dear sir! I beg you — please do not come any closer. Naturally — I have no idea why — but your appearance, your strange behaviour..."

"Look here," declared the old man, advancing on the doctor. "There must be some misunderstanding."

"My dear sir!" cried the elderly gentleman, staring hypnotised at the revolver and continuing to retreat. "This conversation of ours is taking a most undesirable and, I might say, considering our age, a most undignified course."

He stepped quickly through the gate and hurried away, repeating:

"No, no, a most undesirable course — most undignified!"

The old man reached the gate just as Olga, on her way to have a swim in the river, came level with the agitated gentleman.

Suddenly the old man began waving his arms and calling to Olga to stop. At this the elderly gentleman leaped over a ditch with the agility of a goat, seized Olga's hand and, in a twinkling, the two disappeared around the corner.

The old man burst out laughing. Obviously elated and thoroughly pleased with himself, he went stumping off on his wooden leg singing:

But you'll never understand
Flying fast above the land
How long and slow is the waiting for your plane!

Then he unfastened the strap at his knee, flung the wooden leg into the grass and, tearing off his wig and beard, ran into the house.

Ten minutes later the young and cheerful engineer Georgi Garayev ran down the steps, wheeled his motorcycle out of the barn, called the dog Rita and set her to guard the house, pressed the starter, swung into the saddle and sped off to the river in search of the frightened Olga.

At 11 a.m. Geika and Kolya set out for the reply to the ultimatum.

"Walk straight," Geika growled at Kolya. "You ought to walk with

a light and firm step. But you go hopping along like a chicken trying to catch a worm. Your get-up's fine — pants, shirt and everything — but you still look like nothing on earth. Don't do and take offence — I'm talking sense to you. Now why do you have to lick your lips as you go along? Stick your tongue back in your mouth and keep it where it belongs... And what are *you* doing here?" Geika asked Sima Simakov, who had just popped up in their path.

"Timur sent me to act as liaison," Simakov rattled off. "It's okay even if you don't know what it's all about. You've got your assignment and I've got mine. Kolya, let me blow your bugle — just once. Boy, aren't you looking important today! Geika, you nut! You might have put a pair of boots or shoes on when you're on a mission! Ever seen a barefoot ambassador? Well, so long — you go that way and I go this way. Be seeing you!"

"What a rattle-pate!" Geika shook his head. "Shoots off a hundred words where four would do. Sound your bugle, Kolya. Here's the fence."

"Bring up Mikhail Kvakin!" Geika told the boy whose head appeared above the fence.

"To the right, please. You'll find the gate open to welcome you," Kvakin called from the other side.

"Let's not go," Kolya whispered to Geika, tugging at his hand. "They'll beat us up."

"You mean all of them against us two?" Geika said contemptuously. "Blow your bugle, Kolya — louder! We go wherever we choose!"

They walked through the rusty iron gate and found themselves face to face with a group of boys. In front stood Figure and Kvakin.

"Let's have the answer to our letter," Geika demanded firmly.

Kvakin was smiling, Figure scowling.

"Let's talk this over," Kvakin offered. "Sit down a while, what's the hurry?"

"Give us the answer to the letter," Geika insisted coldly. "We can talk afterwards."

It was hard to tell whether he was play-acting, this upright, sturdy chap in the sailor's jersey, at whose side stood the puny, now pallid bugler. Or whether he was really demanding an answer as he stood there, barefoot and broad-shouldered, his grey eyes mere slits, confident that justice and power were on his side.

"Here, take it," said Kvakin, handing him a note.

Geika unfolded the sheet of paper. What he saw was a crude drawing of a thumb to a nose captioned with a dirty word.

Geika calmly tore the sheet in two; not a muscle of his face moved. And at that moment the two boys were seized by the arms.

They did not resist.

"You deserve a black eye for delivering ultimatums like that," said Kvakin, coming up to Geika. "But we don't want to be too hard on you. We'll lock you up till night-time in here"— he pointed to the chapel — "and during the night we'll clean out the garden at No. 24."

"Oh no, you won't," replied Geika unruffled.

"Oh yes, we will!" cried Figure, hitting Geika in the face.

"You can hit me a hundred times," said Geika. He shut his eyes tight and then opened them again. "Kolya," he grunted encouragingly, "keep your pecker up. I've got a feeling there'll be a No. 1 general rallying signal today."

The captives were shoved into the small chapel with its closed iron shutters. Both doors were then locked, bolted and barred from the outside.

"Well," Figure shouted at the door through cupped palms, "how are things going now, your way or ours?"

From inside came a hollow, scarcely audible answer:

"No, you bums, from now on things'll never go your way any more!"

Figure spat in disgust.

"His brother's a sailor," the close-cropped Alyosha explained morosely. "He and my uncle serve on the same ship."

"So what?" Figure asked menacingly. "Who are you, the captain or what?"

"You hit him when he couldn't use his hands. Is that fair now?"

"I'll sock you one, too!" Figure snarled and swung his fist at Alyosha.

The two boys rolled over and over on the grass. The others grabbed them by the arms and legs and tried to haul them apart.

Nobody noticed Sima Simakov's face appearing briefly in the thick foliage of a lime tree which grew near the fence.

Sima slipped to the ground and sprinted across the vegetable patches toward the river, where Timur and the boys were swimming.

Olga, her head covered with a towel, was lying on the hot sandy beach reading.

Zhenya was having a bathe. Suddenly somebody came up from behind and gave her a hug.

She turned round.

"Hello," said a tall, dark-eyed girl. "Timur sent me, my name's Tanya, and I'm in his company too. He's sorry you got into trouble with your sister because of him. Your sister must be awfully bad-tempered, isn't she?"

"Tell him not to feel sorry," muttered Zhenya, reddening. "Olga isn't bad-tempered at all, she's a bit tough, that's all." She made a little gesture of exasperation and added on a note of despair: "Oh, sister! Just you wait till Dad comes home!"

They clambered out onto the steep bank a little bit to the left of the beach. Here they ran into Nyura.

"Hello, recognise me?" she asked Zhenya, speaking, as always, very quickly through clenched teeth. "You do? I recognised you right away. There's Timur!" She pointed to the opposite bank, which was teeming with boys. "I know who found the goat for me, and who stacked the firewood, and who gave my brother the strawberries. And I know you too," she said, turning to Tanya. "I once saw you sitting in your vegetable garden crying. You oughtn't to cry. Doesn't do any good. Hey, stand still, you devil, or I'll throw you into the water!" she yelled at the goat, which was tied to a clump of bushes. Then she pulled off her dress. "Come on, girls, let's jump in!"

Zhenya and Tanya exchanged glances. She was somehow very comical, this sunburned girl who looked like a Gypsy!

Holding hands, they went up to the edge of the steep bank overlooking the clear, rippling blue water.

"Well, shall we jump?"

"Yes, let's!"

And all together they plunged into the water.

No sooner had they surfaced than somebody else plopped in by their side.

It was Sima Simakov who had taken a running dive from the bank in his sandals, shorts and shirt.

Tossing back his wet hair and spluttering and snorting, he swam off

with long strokes toward the opposite bank.

"Trouble, Zhenya, big trouble!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Geika and Kolya've been locked up!"

Olga strolled up the hill reading her book. Where the steep path cut across the road she came upon Georgi standing by his motorcycle. They greeted each other.

"I was riding along when I saw you coming. So I thought I'd wait and give you a lift if you were going the same way."

"That's not true!" Olga retorted. "You were waiting for me on purpose."

"All right, I was," said Georgi. "Have it your way if you like. I must apologise for scaring you this morning. *I* was the lame old fellow at the gate, you see. I was dressed for rehearsal. Climb on and I'll take you home."

Olga shook her head.

He placed a bouquet of flowers on her book.

It was a nice bouquet. Olga blushed in confusion — and threw it to the ground.

Georgi had not expected that.

"Look here," he said with chagrin. "You play and sing well, and you have nice straightforward eyes. I haven't offended you in any way. I don't think even people of the most reinforced concrete professions should act like that."

"You shouldn't give me flowers!" Olga said guiltily, frightened by what she had done. "You — you can give me a lift without offering me flowers."

She took her seat on the leather cushion and the motorcycle sped off.

When the bike came to a fork in the road it ignored the road to the estate and tore down the one leading out into the open country.

"You've taken the wrong road," Olga shouted. "We should have gone to the right!"

"This is a better road," Georgi replied. "It's more fun this way."

Another turn, and they roared through a rustling, shady stand of trees. A dog left its herd to bark at them and chase the bike. But the motorcycle was already far away.

Then a lorry came whining down the road like a heavy artillery shell in trajectory. When Georgi and Olga broke out from the clouds of dust which

it had raised, they came into sight of the belching smokestacks, and glass and steel buildings of what looked like some strange city at the foot of a hill.

"That's our plant!" Georgi shouted. "Three years ago I used to come here to pick mushrooms and wild strawberries!"

Almost without slackening speed, the motorcycle executed an U-turn.

"Straight ahead!" Olga cried warningly. "Head straight for home!"

Suddenly the motor died down and they came to a stop.

"Just a moment," Georgi said, jumping to the ground. "A minor breakdown."

He rolled the machine over to a birch tree by the side of the road, took out a monkey wrench and began to tinker with the motor.

"What part are you playing in your opera?" Olga asked, seating herself on the grass. "Why is your get-up so stern and frightening?"

"I've got the part of an old soldier," replied Georgi, busy with the motor. "He's an ex-partisan and a bit off his head. He lives near the border and is obsessed by the idea that our enemies might outwit us. But the soldiers are a gay young lot and spend their off-duty hours playing volleyball. There are all sorts of girls too."

Georgi twisted his features into a frown and began to sing in a low voice:

Again the moon is dimmed behind the clouds.
Three nights I've kept my weary watch — but shrouds
Of misty silence hide the slinking foe.
Even now he is at hand!
But I am old and weak, so sleep not thou,
Sleep not, my motherland!

Then he switched to another key and chanted in imitation of the chorus:

Be still, old man — be still!

"What do they mean by 'be still'?" Olga asked, wiping the dust from her lips with a handkerchief.

"It means," explained Georgi, continuing to work away with his monkey wrench, "it means sleep in peace, you old fool! Officers and men

are at their posts... Olga, did your sister tell you about our talk?"

"She did, and I scolded her for it."

"You shouldn't have. She's a very amusing child. I said 'Oh,' and she said, 'Boo'!"

"That amusing child can make life pretty difficult," Olga said. "A boy by the name of Timur has been hanging around her. He's in with that hoodlum Kvakin. I simply can't keep him away from our house."

"Timur? Hm-hm," Georgi coughed in embarrassment. "Mean to say he's in that gang? I don't believe he's one of those ... not likely ... oh well! Don't you worry. I'll see he leaves your house alone. Olga, why don't you study music? What's an engineer, anyway? I'm an engineer myself, so what?"

"Aren't you a good engineer?"

"Good enough," replied Georgi, moving closer to Olga and starting to tinker with the hub of the front wheel. "I'm not at all a bad engineer, but you play and sing so well."

"Look here, Georgi," murmured Olga. She moved away in confusion. "I don't know what sort of engineer you are, but you certainly go about repairing your machine in a very odd way."

Olga gestured in imitation of his aimless tapping at the plugs and the outside of the engine with his monkey wrench.

"Nothing odd about it at all. Everything's being done in the proper way." He jumped to his feet and gave the frame a couple of taps with the monkey wrench. "There you are, the job's finished. Olga, is your father an Army officer?"

"Yes."

"That's fine. I'm one too."

"There's no making you out!" Olga shrugged her shoulders. "First you're an engineer, then an actor and now an Army officer. Perhaps you're a flyer as well?"

"No," laughed Georgi. "Flyers dump bombs onto people's heads from above, but we strike through iron and through reinforced concrete — straight to the heart."

Again the rye fields, woods and river whirled past. Soon they came to Olga's house.

At the sound of the motorcycle Zhenya came skipping out onto the porch. She blushed when she saw Georgi, but after he had driven off she

went up to Olga, hugged her and said enviously:

"Ooh, how happy you look today, Olga!"

At the chapel, the boys had gone off after arranging to meet again later near the garden of No. 24.

Only Figure remained behind. He was perplexed and angered by the silence inside the chapel. The captives neither yelled, nor pounded on the door, nor responded to his taunts and questions.

He then tried a ruse. Opening the outer door, he entered the stone-walled vestibule and held his breath.

While he was standing there with his ear glued to the keyhole, the outer door suddenly closed with a bang, as though someone had hit it with a log.

"Hey, who's there?" he demanded angrily, springing to the door. "Hey, cut out the tricks or I'll sock you one!"

No one replied. He heard strange voices outside. Then he heard the shutters creaking. Someone began to talk to the captives through the bars of the window.

Then the boys inside the chapel burst out laughing. The sound of that laughter made Figure feel uneasy.

At last the outside door was thrown open. Timur, Simakov and Ladygin stood in the doorway.

"Open the second door!" Timur ordered without stirring from his place. "Open it yourself, if you don't want things happening to you!"

Figure reluctantly drew the bolt. Kolya and Geika came out of the chapel.

"Now take their place!" Timur ordered. "Get in, you swine, quick now!" he shouted, clenching his fists. "I've no time to waste talking to you."

Both doors were slammed to on Figure. A heavy bolt was shot through the iron loops and a padlock fixed to it.

Then Timur took a sheet of paper and scribbled on it with his blue pencil:

"Kvakin, no need for a sentry. I've locked them up and am taking the key. I'll come straight to the meeting place this evening."

They ran off. Five minutes later Kvakin came through the gate.

He read the note, fingered the lock, grinned, and retraced his steps to the gate while Figure pounded frantically at the iron door with his fists and heels.

At the gate Kvakin turned around and muttered indifferently:

"Pound away, Geika! You'll have plenty of time to get fed up with it before evening!"

Just before sundown, Timur and Simakov made their way to the market square. At the edge of a straggling row of stalls dealing in soft drinks, vegetables, tobacco, groceries and ice cream, stood a rickety empty booth where cobblers worked on market days.

Timur and Simakov spent a few minutes in that booth.

At dusk the helm in the loft went into action. One after another the wires tightened, conveying the right signals to the right places.

Reinforcements poured in. Quite a large number of boys had already gathered — about two or three dozen. And more kept creeping noiselessly through gaps in the fences.

Tanya and Nyura were sent away. Zhenya stayed at home too. Her assignment was to keep Olga from going out into the garden.

Timur stood by the helm.

"Repeat the signal over the sixth line," Simakov requested anxiously, sticking his head through the window. "We don't seem to be getting any reaction on it."

Two boys were busy making a kind of placard out of a piece of plywood. Ladygin's group arrived.

At last the scouts came in with reports. Kvakin's gang was assembled on the common outside the garden of No. 24.

"Time to start," said Timur. "Get ready, boys!"

He released the wheel and pulled a rope. Slowly the company's flag rose and rippled over the old barn in the uneven light of the moon that was shuttling in and out of the clouds. This was the signal for battle.

A file of a dozen boys crept along the fence of No. 24. Halting in the shade, Kvakin said:

"Everybody's here but Figure."

"He's smart," someone remarked. "I'll bet he's in the garden already. He always barges in first."

Kvakin removed two previously loosened boards from the fence and climbed through. The others followed him. Alyosha remained in the street to keep watch.

Five heads peeped out from the nettle-and weed-filled ditch on the other side of the road. Four of them disappeared again. The fifth — Kolya Kolokolchikov's — did not follow immediately, but a hand reached up and slapped it on the crown and this head, too, vanished from sight.

Alyosha, the sentry, looked around. All was quiet, and he stuck his head through the hole in the fence to see if he could hear what was going on inside the garden.

Three boys crept out of the ditch. The next moment the sentry felt strong hands gripping his arms and legs, and before he could cry out he was yanked back from the fence.

"Geika!" he muttered, raising his head. "Where'd you come from?"

"Never mind," hissed Geika, "better hold your tongue! Or I'll forget that you stood up for me."

"Okay," agreed Alyosha. "I'll shut up."

Whereupon he immediately and unexpectedly gave a shrill whistle.

His mouth was clapped shut at once by Geika's broad palm. Hands grabbed him and dragged him away.

The boys in the garden heard the whistle. Kvakin spun around. The whistle was not repeated. Kvakin peered into the darkness. He thought he saw the bushes in the corner of the garden moving.

"Figure!" he called in a low voice. "That you hiding there, you fool?"

"Kvakin! There's a light!" somebody shouted suddenly. "Look out, here they come!"

In the bushes behind him at least a dozen electric torches were switched on. They advanced quickly on the raiders, confusing and blinding them.

"Fight 'em, don't run!" cried Kvakin, reaching into his pocket for an apple and hurling it at the lights. "Grab the torches and twist their arms off! It's Timur!"

"Timur is here and so am I!" Simakov yelled as he leapt out from behind a bush.

Another dozen or so boys bore down on them from the rear and flanks.

"Oho!" yelled Kvakin. "They've got a regular army here! Run for the fence, fellas!"

The ambushed band made a panic-stricken rush for the fence. Jostling and bumping into one another, the boys tumbled out into the road and fell straight into the arms of Ladygin and Geika.

The moon had quite disappeared behind a cloud. Only voices were to be heard in the darkness:

"Lemme go!"

"Leave me alone!"

"Hands off!! Hey!"

"Quiet, everybody!" Timur's voice rang out. "Don't knock the prisoners about! Where's Geika?"

"I'm here!"

"Take them away!"

"Suppose they won't go?"

"Frog-march 'em!"

"Lemme go, you filthy rats!" someone whined.

"Who was that?" Timur demanded furiously. "Aha, you can dish it out but you can't take it! Geika, give the order and get a move on!"

The prisoners were led to the empty booth on the fringe of the market square and pushed inside one after another.

"Bring Kvakin over here to me," Timur ordered.

Kvakin was led up.

"Ready?" asked Timur.

"All ready."

The last prisoner was shoved into the booth and the door was bolted and locked.

"Run along," Timur told Kvakin. "You're just a joke. Nobody's afraid of you and nobody needs you."

Kvakin stood looking down, expecting a beating.

"Run along," Timur repeated. "Take this key and let your friend Figure out of the chapel."

Kvakin did not move.

"Let the fellas out or lemme in with them," he growled.

"No," said Timur, "that's over and done with. You're finished with them and they're finished with you."

A cacophony of whistles and catcalls followed Kvakin as he slowly

walked off, hunching his shoulders. Ten paces away he stopped and straightened up.

"I'll beat the life out of you!" he shouted savagely at Timur. "I'll smash you single-handed. To a pulp!" After which he plunged into the darkness.

"Ladygin, you and your five can go," said Timur. "What's your next assignment?"

"No. 22, Bolshaya Vasilkovskaya — stack the logs."

"Fine. Get to work!"

A whistle blew at the station nearby. A suburban train had pulled in and the passengers would soon be coming from the station. Timur began to hurry.

"Simakov, you and your five — what's yours?"

"No. 38, Malaya Petrakovskaya." He added with a laugh, "Same as usual: buckets, barrel and water. S'long!"

"Fine, get to work! Well, and now ... people are coming this way. The rest can go home. Quick now!"

As the new arrivals began to trickle into the square an infernal clatter broke out. They stopped in alarm. Another outburst of banging and yelling followed. Lights went on in the windows of neighbouring houses. Somebody switched on the light over the market stalls, and the crowd saw the following notice hanging on the booth:

PASSERS-BY, DON'T BE SORRY FOR THEM!

Inside are people who sneak into the gardens of peaceful residents at night and steal apples and things.

The key to the padlock is behind this notice. The person who releases the prisoners is warned first to make sure he has no relatives or friends among them.

It is late at night and the black-bordered red star on the gate is invisible. But it is there.

Once again, the scene is the garden of the house where the little girl lives.

Two ropes are let down from a branch of a tree. A boy climbs down the rough trunk, fastens a board to the ropes and sits on it to see whether

the new swing — for swing it is — is strong enough.

The stout branch creaks a bit, the leaves rustle and stir. A bird, disturbed from its slumbers, twitters and flaps its wings. It is quite late. Olga has gone to bed long ago. Zhenya is asleep, and so are the boy's comrades: the jolly Simakov, the taciturn Ladygin, funny little Kolya. Brave Geika is tossing about in his bed and mumbling in his sleep.

The clock in the watch-tower strikes the quarter hour: "A day's passed — a deed's done! Ding-dong! One, two!"

Yes, it is quite late.

The boy gets off the swing, searches in the grass and picks up a heavy bouquet of wild flowers.

Zhenya had gathered them.

He tiptoes softly up the steps of the moonlit porch so as not to wake and frighten the sleepers, and places the bouquet carefully on the top step. The boy is Timur.

It was Sunday morning. The Young Communist League had arranged a grand carnival and concert in the park to celebrate the anniversary of the victory of the Red Army at Lake Khasan* in the Far East.

The girls had run off to the carnival grounds early in the morning. Olga quickly ironed her blouse and then took stock of the wardrobe. When she shook out Zhenya's apron-dress a slip of paper fell out of the pocket.

Olga picked it up and read:

"No need to be afraid of anyone at home. Everything's fine and I won't tell. Timur."

What wouldn't he tell? What didn't she need to be afraid of? What sort of a secret was that sly, close child hiding from her? No! This must be put an end to. When Dad left he had said... She must act quickly and firmly.

Georgi tapped at the window.

"Olga," he exclaimed, "you've got to help me! A delegation's come round — they want me to sing at the concert. Today's such an occasion —

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* Khasan — a lake in the southeastern part of Primorski Territory, RSFSR. From July 29 to August 11, 1938 the lake was the scene of an armed conflict between the Soviet Union and Japan, unleashed by the Japanese militarists. — *Ed.*

I couldn't very well refuse. I want you to accompany me on your accordion."

"Yes — but why don't you get a pianist?" Olga said in surprise. "Why do you want an accordion?"

"Olga, I don't want a pianist, I want to sing with you! It'll work out fine. May I jump in through the window? Put that iron away and take out your accordion. Here, I've got it out myself. All you have to do is press the keys and I'll sing."

"Look here, Georgi," said Olga, ruffled. "Must you climb in through the window when there is a perfectly good door?"

There was a noisy crowd in the park. Cars filled with holiday-makers rolled up in a continuous stream. Vans drove up laden with sandwiches, buns, soft drinks, sausages, sweets and cakes. An array of ice cream vendors spread out over the grounds.

Phonographs screeched in every imaginable key over the lawns where picnickers were settling down to unpack their lunches.

The bands blared. At the entrance to the open-air theatre the old doorman was arguing with a telegraph line repairman who was trying to enter with all his tools — monkey wrenches, straps, iron spikes and all.

"Listen, man, you can't go in with those tools. Today's a holiday. You go home first, give yourself a wash and brush up and put on some decent clothes."

"But it's a free performance, isn't it? I don't need a ticket!"

"Makes no difference. They're singing in there. Only thing you've forgotten to bring with you's your telegraph pole. You move along too, citizen," he said to another man. "Can't you hear there's a concert on, singing and music? And you've got a bottle sticking out of your pocket!"

"But look here, old boy," the other stuttered. "I've got to — I'm the tenor!"

"Get along with you — Tenor," retorted the old doorman. He pointed to the repairman. "This Bass over here isn't making trouble. You'd better keep quiet too."

Zhenya, who had been told by the boys that Olga had gone backstage with her accordion, fidgeted impatiently in her seat.

At last Georgi and Olga came onto the stage. Zhenya was terrified:

she was afraid the audience would laugh at Olga.

But nobody laughed.

Georgi and Olga looked so nice, young and gay standing there on the stage that Zhenya felt like rushing up and hugging them both.

Olga picked up her accordion.

A deep line furrowed Georgi's forehead. He hunched his shoulders and lowered his head. He was an old man now, and in a low, sonorous voice he began to sing:

Three nights I've kept my weary watch. I peer
Into the dismal dark and always seem to hear
Muffled, suspicious sounds — my rifle burns
Uneasy in my hand
And, as full twenty years ago, so my heart yearns
Now to defend my land.
As in the long nights of that other war
I keep good watch as I have watched before.
And if I'm called upon to help my country's plight
Against a hireling foe,
Then — old man though I be — I'll stand and fight
As twenty years ago.

"Lovely! Poor brave old fellow! What a beautiful voice," Zhenya murmured to herself. "That's the way, Olga! What a pity Dad isn't here to see you play!"

After the concert Georgi and Olga strolled hand in hand through the park.

"It's all very well," Olga was saying, "but I can't think where Zhenya's got to."

"She was standing on her seat and yelling 'Bravo, bravo!'" said Georgi. "Then —" Georgi faltered, "then a boy came up to her and they disappeared."

"What boy?" Olga asked anxiously. "Georgi, you're older than me. Tell me what I am to do with her. Look, I found this note this morning."

Georgi frowned thoughtfully as he read the note.

"'Don't be afraid' means 'don't do as you're told'," Olga said. "Oh, if I could only lay my hands on that boy I'd give him a piece of my mind!"

Olga tuck d the note away. They were silent for several moments. But the music was so gay and everybody about them so merry that they soon linked hands again and resumed their stroll.

Suddenly, at a crossing, they bumped into another couple walking along hand in hand in an equally friendly fashion. It was Timur and Zhenya.

Both couples were so taken aback that they greeted each other politely without stopping.

"That's him!" said Olga, clutching desperately at Georgi's sleeve. "That's the boy."

"Yes," said Georgi, abashed. "And the worst part of it is that it is Timur, my own daredevil of a nephew."

"And you — you knew!" Olga bristled. "And never said a word to me!"

Shaking off his hand she ran down the walk. But neither Timur nor Zhenya was in sight. She turned down a crooked little path and came upon Timur who was standing facing Figure and Kvakin.

"Look here," she said, walking right up to him. "It's not enough that you sneak into gardens and break trees, even old women's and the little orphaned girl's. It's not enough that even the dogs run away from you. You're leading my sister astray and turning her against me into the bargain. You may wear a Pioneer tie, but you're nothing but a scoundrel!"

Timur turned pale.

"That's not true," he said. "You don't know anything."

Olga made an impatient gesture and ran off to find Zhenya.

Timur stood there and said nothing.

Figure and Kvakin could make nothing of it and they, too, were silent.

"Well, Commissar?" said Kvakin. "I see you have your nasty moments too."

"Yes, Chief," replied Timur, slowly raising his eyes. "I don't feel very happy right now. I'd rather you had caught me and beaten the life out of me than have had to listen to that on your account."

"Why'd you keep quiet?" Kvakin sniggered. "You could've said it was us and not you. We were here all the time."

"Sure!" agreed Figure gleefully. "You could've said that and we'd have given you a sock on the jaw for it."

But Kvakin, who had not expected this particular kind of support from Figure, stared coldly at his friend. Meanwhile Timur slowly walked off,

slapping the tree trunks with his hand as he went.

"He's proud," said Kvakin quietly. "Wants to cry, but won't."

"Let's give him something to cry about," said Figure. He hurled a fir cone at Timur.

"He's proud," Kvakin repeated hoarsely. "And you — you're a stinker!" And he swung his fist at Figure.

Figure gaped, then let out a howl and bolted. Kvakin ran after him and punched him twice in the back.

At last Kvakin stopped, picked up his cap, hit it against his knee to shake off the dust, went up to an ice-cream vendor, bought a cone, leaned against a tree and, breathing heavily, bit greedily into the ice cream.

Down by the rifle range Timur came upon Geika and Sima.

"Timur!" Sima called. "Your uncle's looking for you and he seems pretty mad."

"I know, I'm going home."

"Will you come back?"

"I don't know."

"Timur!" said Geika with unexpected gentleness, taking his comrade's hand. "What's the matter? We haven't done anyone any harm. And you know that when a man's in the right..."

"Yes, I know — he's not afraid of anything in the world. But it doesn't prevent him getting hurt."

Timur strode away.

Meanwhile Zhenya ran up to Olga, who was carrying her accordion home.

"Olga!"

"Go away!" said Olga without looking at her sister. "I don't want to talk to you any more. I'm going to Moscow right away, and you can gad about till dawn with whomever you like for all I care."

"But Olga..."

"I don't want to talk to you. The day after tomorrow we'll move back to Moscow. And we'll wait for Dad there."

"Yes! I'll tell Dad, and not you — I'll tell him everything!" Choking with tears of rage, she ran off in search of Timur.

She found Geika and Simakov and asked them if they had seen Timur.

"He's been called home," Geika said. "His uncle's cross with him because of something to do with you."

Zhenya, now beside herself, stamped her foot and clenched her fists. "There's — justice — for you!"

She flung her arms around the trunk of a birch tree, but just then Tanya and Nyura rushed up to her.

"Zhenya!" cried Tanya. "What's the matter? Come on, Zhenya! An accordion player has come and the dances have begun — the girls are all there."

They shook her and hugged her and dragged her over to the ring where frocks and blouses bright as flowers could be seen whirling round and round.

"Zhenya, don't cry!" said Nyura, speaking quickly, as usual, through clenched teeth. "Grandma hits me sometimes but I never cry! Come on, girls, let's get inside! Her-r-re goes!"

"Her-r-re goes!" Zhenya chimed in laughing imitation of Nyura.

Breaking through the ring, they whirled and span in the gay abandon of the dance.

As soon as Timur came in, his uncle took him up.

"I'm sick of your night adventures," Georgi began. "Sick of your signals, buzzes and ropes. What was that strange business with the blanket?"

"That was a mistake."

"Some mistake! And I'll ask you to leave that girl alone; her sister doesn't like you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I suppose you deserve it. What are these notes you've been writing? What sort of peculiar dates have you been keeping in the garden at dawn? Olga says you're making a hoodlum of the girl."

"She's lying," retorted Timur indignantly. "A Komsomol member, too. If there's anything she doesn't understand, she could ask me. I'd tell her."

"Good. But until you have told her, I forbid you to go near their house. And, in general, if you don't do as you're told I'll ship you back to your mother at once."

He turned to go out.

"Uncle," Timur called after him. "When you were a boy what did you do? What did you play at?"

"We? We used to run around, jump, climb roofs. Sometimes we fought. But our games were all quite simple and everybody could understand them."

To punish Zhenya, Olga left for Moscow that evening without saying another word to her.

She had nothing to do in Moscow, so she looked in on a friend of hers instead of going straight home. It was almost ten by the time she got to the flat and saw a telegram pinned to the door.

Olga scanned the short message. It was from their father.

Toward evening, when the vans began to leave the park, Zhenya and Tanya ran home. Zhenya wanted to change into gum-shoes for a game of volleyball.

Just as she was tying her laces the mother of the fair-haired little girl entered the room. The little girl lay asleep in her arms.

The woman was crestfallen when she learned that Olga was not at home.

"I wanted to ask your sister if I could leave my girl here," she said. "I didn't know she wasn't at home. The train arrives tonight, you see, and I have to be in Moscow to meet my mother."

"Leave her with me," said Zhenya. "What if Olga isn't here — aren't I good enough? Put her on my bed. I can sleep on the other one."

"She's sleeping quietly now and won't wake up till morning," the mother said, brightening. "All you have to do is to take a look at her and straighten her pillow now and then."

They undressed the little girl and put her to bed. Her mother left. Zhenya pulled back the curtains so that she could see the bed from outside, and closed the door. Then the two girls dashed off to play volleyball, having settled that they would take turns running back to look at the child.

They had no sooner gone than a postman came up to the porch. He knocked for a long time, and since there was no answer he crossed over to the neighbour's to inquire whether the people who lived in the cottage had moved back to town.

"No," the neighbour said. "The girl was here a moment ago. I can give her the telegram."

The neighbour signed for the telegram, put it in his pocket, sat down on

a bench, lit his pipe, and waited for Zhenya.

An hour and a half later the postman came round again.

"Here's another one," he said. "What's all the fuss about? Be a good fellow and sign for this telegram too."

The neighbour signed the book. It was quite dark now. He opened the gate, went up the steps to the porch and glanced through the window. Inside, a little girl was asleep, with a tawny kitten curled up by her head. That meant the owners were not far away. He opened the top window and shoved the two telegrams through. They fell neatly onto the windowsill, where Zhenya was certain to notice them at once.

But Zhenya did not notice them. She came in, adjusted the child's pillow by the light of the moon, chased off the kitten, undressed and went to bed. She lay for a long time thinking about Life! It wasn't her fault, and it didn't seem to be Olga's either, yet there they were, having their first big quarrel.

Zhenya was sad. She could not fall asleep. She decided to eat a slice of bread and jam. Jumping out of bed, she ran over to the cupboard, switched on the light — and saw the telegrams on the windowsill.

Her heart missed a beat. With trembling fingers she tore open the telegrams.

The first read:

"WILL STOP OVER EN ROUTE MIDNIGHT TO THREE IN MORNING WAIT FOR ME TOWN FLAT DAD"

The second read:

"COME IMMEDIATELY DAD WILL BE IN TOWN TONIGHT OLGA"

Zhenya glanced at the clock with a sinking heart. It was a quarter to twelve. Pulling on her dress and picking up the sleeping child, she dashed out onto the porch like one possessed. Then she changed her mind. She put the child back in bed, ran out of the house and made for the milkwoman's house. There she pounded on the door with her fists and heels until the milkwoman's neighbour poked her head out of the window.

"What are you knocking for?" the neighbour asked in a sleepy voice. "What are you up to now?"

"Please, I'm not up to anything," Zhenya pleaded. "I must see Aunt Masha, the milkwoman. I have to leave a baby with her."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed the neighbour, shutting her window with a bang.

"The old woman left this morning to visit her brother in the village."

A train pulling into the station blew its whistle. Zhenya ran back into the road and bumped into the elderly gentleman, the doctor.

"Sorry!" she gasped. "Can you tell me what train that is?"

The old gentleman produced his watch.

"The eleven fifty-five," he replied. "The last train to Moscow."

"How do you mean, the last?" whispered Zhenya, a lump rising in her throat. "When does the next one leave?"

"The next one leaves in the morning, at three forty. What's the matter with you, child?" he inquired solicitously, catching the reeling girl by the shoulder. "You're crying? Can I help you in any way?"

"No, no, you can't!" said Zhenya, choking back her tears and rushing away. "Nobody in the world can help me now!"

At home she flung herself down on her bed, but the next moment she sprang up and glared at the sleeping child. Then, pulling herself together, she straightened the little girl's blanket and whisked the tawny kitten off the pillow.

She switched on the lights on the porch, in the kitchen and in the living-room, sat down on the sofa and began to rock her head. She sat that way for a long time, thinking about nothing in particular. She accidentally touched the accordion which was lying by her side. Lifting it up mechanically, she began to finger the keys. A sad, solemn melody filled the room. Zhenya abruptly laid the accordion aside and went over to the window. Her shoulders were shaking.

No! She could not stay there alone and bear such torture a minute longer. She lit a candle and stumbled through the garden toward the barn.

There was the loft, with its ropes, map, sacks and flags. She lit the lantern, went over to the wheel, found the right rope, hooked it on, and then jerked the wheel.

Timur was fast asleep when Rita touched his shoulder with her paw. He did not feel the gentle push. Rita then fastened her teeth into the blanket and dragged it off him onto the floor.

Timur sat up.

"What's the matter?" he asked, perplexed. "Anything wrong?"

The dog gazed into his eyes, wagged her tail and tossed her head. At that moment Timur heard the little bronze bell tinkling.

He went out onto the porch and picked up the receiver, wondering who could want him at that time of night.

"Hello, Timur listening. Who is it? You? Is that you, Zhenya?"

At first Timur listened calmly. Then his lips began to twitch and the blood rushed to his face. He was breathing hard.

"And only for three hours?" he asked agitatedly. "Zhenya, you're not crying, are you? I can hear you — you *are* crying. You mustn't! Don't! I'll come right away!"

He hung up and snatched a timetable from the shelf.

"Yes, there it is, the last one's at 23:55. The next one leaves at 3:40." He stood there biting his lips. "Too late! Couldn't he do something? No! Too late!"

But a red star shone day and night over the gate of Zhenya's house. He had lit it himself, with his own hand, and its rays glittered straight and sharp before his eyes.

An Army officer's daughter was in trouble! An Army officer's daughter was in need of help!

He dressed hastily and ran out. A few minutes later he was standing on the porch of the old gentleman's house. The light was still on in the doctor's room. Timur knocked at the door. It was opened by the surprised doctor.

"What is it?" he asked drily.

"I'd like to talk to you," replied Timur.

"Me?" The old gentleman reflected a moment, then opened the door wide with a flourish and said, "In that case, please come in."

They did not talk long.

"That's all we've been doing," Timur wound up with flashing eyes. "That's all we've been doing and that's how we've been playing. That's why I need your Kolya now."

The old man rose without a word. He took Timur abruptly by the chin, tilted back his head, looked into his eyes, and then left the room.

He entered Kolya's bedroom and tugged at the boy's shoulder.

"Get up," he said. "You're wanted."

"I haven't done anything," Kolya babbled, his eyes rolling in fear. "Honest, Grandpa, I haven't done anything."

"Get up," the old gentleman repeated shortly. "Your comrade has come for you."

Zhenya was sitting on a pile of straw in the loft, her arms clasped around her knees, waiting for Timur. But instead of Timur, what should come poking through the window but Kolya's tousled head!

"You?" Zhenya exclaimed. "What do you want?"

"I don't know," replied Kolya in a low, frightened voice. "I was sleeping. He came. I got up. He sent me. He told me to tell you to come down to the gate."

"What for?"

"I don't know. I'm dizzy myself. I can't make head or tail of it, Zhenya."

There was no one of whom to ask permission. His uncle was in Moscow. Timur lit a lantern, picked up an axe, called the dog, and went out into the garden. He stopped in front of the door of the shed. His eyes shifted from his axe to the padlock. Yes! He knew that it was wrong, but there was no other way out. A well-aimed hit broke the padlock, and he wheeled the motorcycle out of the shed.

"Rita!" he exclaimed sadly, kneeling to kiss the dog on the nose. "Don't be angry! I couldn't help it."

Zhenya and Kolya were waiting at the gate. A light bore down on them swiftly from a distance. They heard the chugging of a motor, then screwed up their eyes and backed up against the fence as they were caught in a glaring headlight. Suddenly, the light went out, the motor was shut off and they saw it was Timur.

"Kolya," he began, without saying hello or asking any questions. "You stay here and guard the little girl asleep in the house. You'll answer for her to the company. Zhenya, hop on. We're off! To Moscow!"

Zhenya squealed delightedly, hugged Timur with all her might and kissed him.

"Hop on, Zhenya, hop on!" Timur shouted, trying to look stern. "Hold on tight! Off we go! Forward!"

The motor snorted, the horn honked and soon the red tail light was lost from view.

Kolya, completely dazed, picked up a stick, and, holding it as though it were a rifle, tramped around the brightly lit cottage.

"Yes," he muttered, pacing importantly up and down. "A soldier's life is certainly tough! No peace, night or day!"

It was getting on for three in the morning. Colonel Alexandrov was sitting at a table on which was a pot of cold tea, some slices of sausage, cheese and bread.

"I'll have to go in half an hour," he said to Olga. "Pity I didn't get a chance to see Zhenya. Olga, are you crying?"

"I don't know why she hasn't come. I'm so sorry for her, she wanted to see you so much. Now she'll go right off her head. And she's crazy enough as it is!"

"Olga," said her father, getting up. "Whatever you say I can't believe that Zhenya would mix with a bad crowd, or that she could be led astray, or that anyone could order her about. No! It isn't like her!"

"There you go!" said Olga reproachfully. "You'll be telling her that next. As it is I hear enough about her taking after you. But you're wrong this time! Would you believe she climbed onto the roof and let a rope down through the chimney. Just as I was about to start ironing, the iron hopped out of my hand and went sailing up the chimney. Dad, when you left she had four frocks. Two are already in tatters. She grew out of the third and I won't let her wear the fourth. I made her three new frocks myself but they never last more'n a few days. She's always covered with scratches and blue marks. And when you talk to her she purses her lips and opens her blue eyes wide. Of course, everybody thinks she's a pretty little flower, hardly a girl at all. But just try and touch her! Some flower! More like a stinging nettle! Dad, don't you go thinking she takes after you. If you tell her that she'll be so full of herself she'll go dancing round the chimney-pots for three days running!"

"All right," agreed her father, giving her a hug. "I'll talk to her. I'll write her a letter. But you mustn't be too strict with her, Olga. Tell her I love her dearly, that I think of her, that we'll soon be back and that she mustn't cry, because she's an officer's daughter."

"She'll cry all the same," said Olga nestling close to him. "I'm also an officer's daughter, and I'll cry too."

Her father glanced at the clock, walked over to the mirror, put on his belt and straightened his tunic.

Suddenly the outside door opened and shut with a bang. The hangings over the doorway were pulled aside and Zhenya appeared, her shoulders hunched forward as though she were about to make a leap.

But instead of crying out or springing forward she glided noiselessly across the room and buried her face on her father's chest without uttering a sound.

Her forehead was spattered with mud, her crumpled dress all stained.

"Zhenya, what does it mean?" Olga asked anxiously. "How did you get here?"

Without turning her head, Zhenya waved her hand as much as to say: "Wait a moment! Leave me alone! Don't ask questions!"

Father picked her up, sat down on the sofa and took her in his lap. He looked at her face and wiped her spattered forehead with his palm.

"Well done, Zhenya! Good girl!"

"But you're all covered with mud — your face is black! How did you get here?" Olga asked again.

Zhenya pointed to the hangings at the door, and Olga saw Timur standing there.

He was pulling off his leather driving gloves. His temple was smeared with yellow grease. His face was moist and tired, the face of a working man who has done his job well. He nodded his head in greeting.

"Dad!" cried Zhenya, jumping from her father's lap and running over to Timur. "Don't you believe anyone! They don't know anything. This is Timur — my very good comrade."

Her father rose and, without hesitation, shook Timur's hand. A triumphant smile flitted over Zhenya's face. She flashed a quick, searching look at Olga, who, still quite baffled, went up to Timur:

"Well, hello, then..."

Soon the clock struck three.

"Dad," Zhenya said anxiously. "Are you going already? Our clock is fast."

"No, Zhenya, that's the correct time."

"Dad, your watch is fast too." She ran over to the telephone and dialled the time. A measured metallic voice answered:

"The time is now four minutes past three."

Zhenya glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed.

"It's fast, but only one minute fast. Dad, take us to the station with you; we'll see you off."

"Sorry, Zhenya, I can't. I'll be much too busy."

"Why? You've got your ticket already, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"In a first-class sleeper?"

"Yes, in a first-class sleeper."

"Oh, how I'd love to travel far, far away with you in a first-class sleeper!"

It was not a regular station but a sort of shunting yard where the trains halted before being switched onto their right lines. There were tracks, switches, trains and carriages — but no passengers. An armoured train was drawn up at the platform. An iron window opened and, for a second, the face of the engine-driver was visible in the light of the fire-box.

Zhenya's father, Colonel Alexandrov, stood on the platform in his leather coat. A lieutenant came up to him, saluted and said:

"Comrade Colonel, may we start?"

"Yes!" The colonel glanced at his watch: three fifty-three. "The orders are to leave at three fifty-three."

Colonel Alexandrov went up to his carriage and looked about him. It was growing light, but the sky was overcast. He turned the moist handle and the heavy door opened. As he placed his foot on the step he smiled and said to himself:

"In a first-class sleeper?"

"Yes, in a first-class sleeper."

The heavy steel door shut behind him with a thud.

Smoothly, without jerking or creaking, the armoured giant went into motion and steadily picked up speed.

The engine glided past, then the gun turrets. Moscow was left behind. Mist was rising. The stars faded. Day was breaking.

Finding both Timur and the motorcycle gone when he returned from town in the morning, Georgi decided to send Timur back to his mother then and there.

He had just sat down to write the letter when he glanced through the window and saw a soldier coming up the gravel walk.

The soldier produced an envelope.

"Comrade Garayev?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Please sign for this envelope."

The soldier left. Georgi inspected the envelope and whistled significantly.

Yes! Here it was, what he had been waiting for so long!

He opened the envelope, read the message inside and then crumpled up the letter he had begun to write. Now he did not have to send Timur home, but to send a wire to the boy's mother asking her to come out to them.

Just then Timur entered the room. At the sight of him Georgi brought his fist down on the table furiously. In Timur's wake came Olga and Zhenya.

"Shush!" said Olga. "There's no need to shout or bang the table. It's not Timur's fault. It's your fault, and mine too."

"That's right," said Zhenya. "Don't you dare shout at him. Olga, don't touch the table. That revolver of theirs makes an awful noise when it goes off."

Georgi looked at Zhenya, then at the revolver, then at the chipped clay ashtray. He began to see the light.

"So it was you who slept here that night, Zhenya?" he said.

"Yes, it was I. Olga, tell him all about it while Timur and I get some kerosene and a cloth and clean up the bike."

Olga was sitting on the porch the following day when an Army officer came in through the gate. He walked with a confident stride, like a man returning to his own home. Olga, perplexed, rose to meet him.

Georgi stood in front of her in the uniform of a captain of the tank corps.

"What's this?" Olga asked softly. "A new part in your opera?"

"No," replied Georgi. "I've dropped in to say goodbye. This isn't a new part — it's just a new uniform."

"Is this," Olga asked, pointing to his insignia and blushing slightly, "what you meant the other day when you said 'We strike through iron and through reinforced concrete — straight to the heart'?"

"Yes, this is it. Sing me something, Olga, something for me to take away on my long, long journey."

He sat down. Olga picked up her accordion.

Airmen all and pilots! Bombers all and fighters!
Now you've taken off for far away.
When will you come back to me?
I cannot tell when it will be
Only — come back! Any time — on any day...
Good luck, wherever you may be,
On the ground, above the sea
Or flying far aloft through foreign skies —
Where'er you roam
May your two wings bravely bear
Their red stars so bright and dear
And may they bear you back to me,
Back home!

"There," she said. "But it's all about flyers. I don't know any good songs about tankmen."

"It doesn't matter," Georgi said. "See if you can't say something nice to me — and forget about the songs."

Plunged in thought, seeking the right good word, Olga gazed quietly and intently into his grey, no longer laughing eyes.

Zhenya, Timur and Tanya were in the garden.

"Listen," suggested Zhenya. "Georgi is leaving. Let's get the whole company to see him off. Let's send out the No. 1 general rally signal. Won't it cause a commotion though!"

"No, better not," Timur said.

"Why not?"

"Better not. We didn't see anyone else off like that."

"Oh, all right, if we oughtn't to, we won't," agreed Zhenya. "You sit here while I go and get a drink."

When she left Tanya burst out laughing.

"What's the matter?" asked Timur.

Tanya laughed all the louder. "There's a clever girl for you! She's a sly one, our Zhenya! 'I'll go and get a drink,' she says!"

"Ten-shun!" Zhenya's voice rang out triumphantly from the loft. "Here goes No. 1 general rally signal!"

"She's mad!" Timur sprang up. "That'll fetch up a hundred chaps! What are you doing?!"

But the heavy wheel had already creaked and turned, the ropes had jerked and pulled: "three-stop, three-stop, stop!" And under the roofs of sheds, in attics and in chicken coops the signal buzzers, bottles, tin cans and rattles rang, banged and clattered.

If not a hundred, at least fifty youngsters came charging into the garden in response to the familiar signal.

"Olga!" Zhenya flew up onto the porch. "We're going to see Georgi off too! There's a lot of us. Take a look."

"Oho!" exclaimed Georgi in surprise. "You've got a big company there. Big enough to be loaded onto a train and sent off to the front."

"Can't be done," Zhenya sighed, repeating Timur's words. "All the officers and other bosses have strict orders to kick out all the kids. It's a shame! I could fit in somewhere too — take part in a battle, in an attack. Machine-guns forward! Number one!.."

"Number one braggart in the world!" Olga teased. She fixed the strap of the accordion over her shoulder and said:

"Well, if we're going to see him off, let's do it properly, music and all!"

They trooped out into the road. Olga played her accordion, and an orchestra of bottles, tin cans, glass jars and sticks stepped out in front and struck up a lively accompaniment.

They tramped down the green streets, their ranks growing as they marched along. At first people could not understand what all the noise and the singing was about. But as soon as they were told they smiled,

and called out to wish Georgi good luck.

As they approached the platform an army train swept by.

The first carriages were full of soldiers. The crowd waved and called out to them. Then came flatcars with a whole forest of green-shafted army carts. Then horse-boxes. The horses tossed their heads and chewed hay. They, also, were greeted with "hurrahs". Finally came a flatcar bearing a large, angular object covered over with grey tarpaulin. Standing by it and swaying with the motion of the train was a sentry.

The troop train disappeared and a passenger train pulled in. Timur said goodbye to his uncle.

Olga went up to Georgi.

"Well, goodbye!" she said. "Will it be for long?"

He shook his head and gripped her hand.

"I don't know. Let's hope not!"

The whistle blew. The orchestra blared. The train pulled out.

Olga stood lost in thought.

In Zhenya's eyes there shone a great happiness, though she did not know why.

Timur was upset, but he tried to mask his emotions.

"Well," he said in a voice not quite his own, "now I'm on my own, too." And, bracing his shoulders, he added, "However, Mother will be coming tomorrow."

"What about me?" Zhenya shouted. "And what about them?" She pointed to his comrades. "And this?" She pointed to his red star.

"Don't worry!" Olga said to Timur, shaking herself out of her reverie. "You've always thought about others, and they'll do the same to you."

Timur raised his head.

Grand, straightforward lad that he was, he answered exactly as might have been expected.

He swept his eyes over his comrades, smiled, and said:

"I see everybody feels fine. Then I feel fine too!"

1940

CHUCK AND GECK

There was once a man who dwelt in the forest by the Blue Mountains. He worked very hard but there was always more work to be done and he had no time to go home for his holidays.

Finally, when winter came, he felt so terribly lonely that he wrote to his wife asking her to come and visit him with the boys.

He had two boys: Chuck and Geck.

They lived with their mother in a great big city far, far away — there was not a finer city in the whole wide world.

Day and night red stars sparkled atop the towers of this city. And its name, of course, was Moscow.

*

Just as the postman climbed the stairs with the letter, Chuck and Geck were locked in battle. And a fine battle it was too.

What they were fighting about I no longer remember. It seems to me that Chuck had taken Geck's matchbox — or perhaps it was that Geck had made off with Chuck's empty shoe polish tin.

The two brothers had punched each other once and were just about to exchange another punch when the bell rang. They looked at each other in alarm. They thought it was Mother. And she was not like other mothers. She never scolded them or shouted at them for fighting. She simply put the culprits in separate rooms and kept them there for a whole hour, or even two, and would not let them play together.

And an hour — tick-tock — has sixty whole minutes in it. Two hours have even more than that.

So the boys quickly wiped away their tears and rushed to open the door.

But it wasn't Mother after all. It was the postman with a letter.

"From Father!" they yelled. "Hurrah! It's from Father! He must be coming soon!"

And they began to caper, leap and turn somersaults over the sofa out of sheer delight. Because, though Moscow was the most wonderful city in the world, when Father was away for a whole long year even Moscow could be a dull place.

They were so excited and happy they did not hear Mother come in.

Imagine her surprise when she found her two wonderful youngsters sprawled on their backs, shrieking and beating a tattoo on the wall with their heels; so vigorously, in fact, that the pictures over the sofa were shaking and the springs in the clock were humming.

But when Mother learned what the rejoicing was about she did not scold her boys.

Instead, she whisked them off the sofa, slipped out of her fur coat and pounced on the letter without even troubling to shake the snowflakes from her hair; they had already melted and were glittering like beads above her dark eyebrows.

Letters, as everyone knows, can be jolly or sad. That is why Chuck and Geck studied Mother's face so intently as she read.

At first she frowned, and they frowned too. Then she smiled. That meant the letter was a jolly one.

"Your father is not coming," she said as she put the letter aside. "He has a lot of work to do and he can't come home."

Chuck and Geck looked at each other in bewilderment. The letter had turned out to be as sad as sad could be.

In another moment they were pouting and snuffling and darting angry glances at Mother, who, for some unknown reason, was smiling.

"He's not coming," she continued, "but he says we should come and visit him."

At that Chuck and Geck bounded off the sofa.

"Queer man!" Mother sighed. "Easy enough to say 'Come and

visit' — as if all one had to do was get into a tramcar and ride off."

"'Course!" Chuck put in quickly. "If he says 'Come' we ought to hop on a tram and go."

"You silly boy," said Mother. "To get there you have to ride in a train for a thousand kilometres, and then another thousand. And after that you have to ride in a sleigh through the taiga. And there, in the taiga, you're sure to run into a wolf or a bear. Goodness, what a fantastic idea! Just think of it yourselves."

But Chuck and Geck would not give the idea even a second's thought. They said they were ready to ride not only a thousand, but all of a hundred thousand kilometres. They weren't afraid of anything. They were brave. Why, didn't they drive away that fierce strange dog from the yard with stones yesterday?

They went on chattering and swinging their arms and stamping their feet and hopping about while Mother sat still and did nothing but listen to them. Then all of a sudden she burst out laughing, swept them both up into her arms, whirled them round and finally tossed them on the sofa.

Between ourselves, she had been expecting such a letter for a long time and she was only teasing Chuck and Geck because she loved fun.

*

It took Mother a week to get them ready for the journey. Meanwhile Chuck and Geck did not waste time.

Chuck made himself a dagger out of a kitchen knife, while Geck found a smooth stick, hammered a nail into it and — lo! — he had such a stout spear that if he were to stick it into a bear's heart, the beast would assuredly fall dead on the spot, provided someone pierced the animal's hide first, of course.

Finally everything was ready. The luggage was packed. A double lock was fixed to the door. The bread crumbs and the stray particles of flour and cereals were brushed out of the cupboard to keep the mice away. And then Mother went off to the railway station to buy tickets for a train leaving the next day.

While she was gone, Chuck and Geck had a quarrel.

Alas! if they had only known the trouble that quarrel would cause,

they certainly would have behaved themselves that day.

Chuck, the thrifty one, had a flat metal box in which he kept tin foil from packets of tea and wrappers from sweets. Also a few blackbird feathers for arrows, some horsehair for a Chinese trick, and other things just as important.

Geck did not have a box of that kind. In general, Geck was a scatterbrain, but he certainly could sing songs.

Now, it so happened that while Chuck was sorting out the contents of his precious box in the kitchen and Geck was singing in the other room, the postman entered and handed Chuck a telegram for Mother.

Chuck put the telegram away in his box and went to see why Geck had stopped singing.

"Rah! Rah! Hurrah!" Geck was shouting. "Hey! Bey! Turumbey!"

Curious, Chuck opened the door, and he saw such a "turumbey" that his hands began to tremble with rage.

In the middle of the room stood a chair, and over its back hung a newspaper all tattered and torn by the spear. That wouldn't have been so bad, but that horrid Geck, imagining Mother's yellow cardboard shoe box to be a bear, was stabbing it with the spear for all he was worth. And in that box Chuck had stored away a tin bugle, three coloured Revolution Day badges and some money — 46 kopeks in all — which he had not squandered like Geck but had put away for their long journey.

At the sight of the battered cardboard box, Chuck snatched the spear from Geck's hands, broke it over his knee and flung the pieces to the floor.

But like a hawk Geck flew at Chuck, wrenched his metal box out of his hands and, jumping up on the windowsill, hurled it out of the window.

Chuck was outraged. He gave an earsplitting howl and with cries of "The telegram! The telegram!" dashed out of the house without even putting on his cap.

Sensing that something was wrong, Geck hurried out after him.

In vain did they search for the metal box with the unopened telegram.

It had either fallen deep into a snowdrift or had dropped on to the pathway and been picked up by someone passing by. In any case, the box with the sealed telegram and all its treasures was lost for good.

At home, Chuck and Geck were silent for a long time. They had already made it up, for they knew that both would get it hot from Mother. Being a whole year older than Geck, Chuck was afraid he might come in for the greater share of the punishment, so he thought hard.

"You know what, Geck! What if we don't say anything about the telegram to Mother? What's a telegram, anyway? We can have just as much fun without it!"

"Mustn't tell a fib," sighed Geck. "Mother gets angrier when you fib."

"But we don't have to fib!" Chuck exclaimed happily. "If she says: 'Where's the telegram?' we'll tell her. But supposing she doesn't, why should we start anything? We're not upstarts."

"All right," agreed Geck. "If we don't have to tell a fib, we'll do as you say. That's a fine idea, Chuck."

No sooner had they decided the matter than Mother came in looking very pleased because she had got good train tickets. She could not help noticing, though, that her dear boys' faces were long and their eyes wet.

"Now, confess, my good citizens," she said, shaking the snow from her coat. "What was the fight about?"

"There wasn't any fight," said Chuck.

"'Course there wasn't," Geck confirmed. "We were *going* to fight but we thought we'd better not."

"Now that's the kind of thoughts I like," Mother said. She took off her coat, sat down on the sofa and showed them the stiff green tickets — one big one and two little ones.

Soon they had their supper. Then the noise subsided, the lights were turned off and they all fell asleep.

Mother knew nothing about the telegram, and so naturally she did not ask the boys about it.

*

The next day they left. But since the train drew out of the station at a very late hour the windows were black, and Chuck and Geck did not see anything of interest.

At night Geck woke up feeling thirsty. Though the little lamp on the ceiling had been turned off, everything round Geck — the tumbler dancing up and down on the white cloth of the table, the yellow orange that now

looked green, and the face of Mother who was fast asleep — was bathed in a bluish light.

Through the snow-flecked window Geck saw the moon — it was an immense moon, not at all like the one in Moscow. He was quite certain now that the train was speeding through high mountains, from where the moon was much nearer.

He woke Mother and asked her for some water. But she refused to give him any for a very good reason and told him to eat a piece of orange instead.

Geck pouted but broke off a section of orange. Now he did not feel like sleeping any longer. He shook Chuck to wake him up. Chuck only snorted angrily and went on sleeping.

Geck then put on his felt boots, opened the door and went out into the corridor.

It was a long and narrow corridor. There were seats attached to the wall, and they shot back with a bang when you got off them. Ten more doors opened out on the corridor. They were all a glossy red and had shiny brass handles.

Geck sat on one seat, then on another, then on a third and so on until he found himself at the end of the coach. But at that very moment the conductor came in with his lantern and scolded Geck for making so much noise when people were sleeping.

As soon as the conductor had gone, Geck hurried back to his compartment. He opened the door with an effort, then closed it ever so carefully so as not to wake Mother, and jumped into the soft bed.

Finding fat old Chuck sprawled all over the bed, Geck poked him in the side to make him move over.

But horrors! Instead of towheaded chubby Chuck, what should Geck see but the angry moustached face of a strange man! It looked at him and barked gruffly:

"Who's that pushing me?"

Geck let out a howl that brought all the passengers down from their berths. The light was switched on, and when Geck saw that he had walked into the wrong compartment he began to howl louder than ever.

When they realised what had happened, everybody laughed. The man with the moustache pulled on his trousers and tunic and took Geck back to his own compartment.

Geck ducked under his blanket and quietened down. The train rocked, the wind moaned.

The strange, immense moon once more shed its blue light on the dancing tumbler, on the bright yellow orange lying on the white cloth, and on the face of Mother, who was smiling at something in her sleep, all unaware of her son's plight.

At last, Geck too fell asleep...

And he dreamed the strangest dream:
The train was stirring; it did seem
That voices sounded everywhere —
Each wheel with mutterings filled the air.
The speeding cars that formed the train
Did join the engine's loud refrain.
First:
Then forward, mates! The night is black,
But we must charge along our track.
Second:
O engine-light, shine bright and far,
And match the matchless morning star.
Third:
Blaze higher, flames. O whistle, shriek.
O wheels, whirl eastward like a streak.
Fourth:
We'll stop our noise at journey's end —
When the Blue Mountains we ascend.

When Geck woke up the wheels had stopped talking and were clicking along steadily underfoot. The sun shone through the frosted window. The berths were made up. Chuck, washed and brushed, was nibbling an apple, while Mother and the army man with the moustache were standing at the open door, laughing over Geck's nocturnal adventures. Chuck showed Geck a pencil the army man had given him. It had a tip made out of a yellow cartridge.

But Geck was neither envious nor greedy. Yes, he was a moony old scatterbrain. Not only had he walked into the wrong compartment at night, but even now he could not remember where he had put his trousers.

But he certainly could sing songs, could Geck.

After washing and saying good morning to Mother, he pressed his face to the cold window-pane to have a look at the places they were passing and what the people who lived there did.

And while Chuck was trotting from door to door making friends with the other passengers, who presented him with all sorts of handy little things — a rubber bottle stopper, a nail, a piece of string — Geck saw quite a bit through the window.

Over there, for instance, stood a forest cottage. A little boy in a shirt, wearing enormous felt boots and carrying a cat, skipped out on the porch. Swish! — and the cat somersaulted into the fluffy snow. It scrambled clumsily to the surface and bounded away.

Now why had he thrown the cat out like that? Probably it had snatched a titbit off the table.

But now the cottage, the little boy and the cat were gone. Instead, there was a factory in a field. The field was white. The smokestacks were red. The smoke was black and the lights in the windows yellow.

What did they make in that factory? But wait! Here was a sentry box and, standing by it, the sentry wrapped in a sheepskin coat. The sheepskin coat made him look so huge that the gun he held seemed a thin straw. But don't you dare go too near him!

And here came a dancing forest. The trees in front twirled quickly while the ones farther back rocked slowly, as though carried by a serene snowy river.

Geck called Chuck, who had just returned to the compartment with a rich collection of presents, and now they began to look out of the window together.

The train swept past large, brightly-lit stations where not less than a hundred locomotives puffed and wheezed back and forth, and past tiny little stations hardly any bigger than the grocery stand round the corner from their home in Moscow.

Trains heaped with ore, coal and huge logs the size of half a coach flew past.

Once they overtook a trainload of cows and bulls. The locomotive was a funny little thing with a shrill squeaky whistle. Suddenly one of the bulls let out such a bellow that the engine driver turned round; he probably thought a big locomotive was coming on behind him.

At one little platform they stopped alongside a powerful armoured train.

On all its sides guns wrapped in tarpaulin jutted out menacingly. Red Army men stood round it, laughing and stamping their feet and clapping their mittened hands to keep warm.

But one man, in a leather coat, stood silent and preoccupied near the armoured train. Chuck and Geck decided that this, of course, was the commander, and that he was waiting for orders from Marshal Voroshilov.*

They saw plenty of things on the way. It was only a pity that a storm was raging outside and the windows were often plastered with snow.

At last, one morning, their train rolled into a little station.

No sooner had Mother set Chuck and Geck on the platform and taken their luggage from the army man, than the train pulled out.

The bags were heaped in the snow. Soon the wooden platform was deserted, but Father was nowhere to be seen. Mother grew very angry at Father. Leaving the children to watch the bags, she walked over to the sleigh drivers to find out which of the sleighs had been sent for them, because they had another hundred kilometres of taigaland to cover to get to the place where Father lived.

Mother was gone for some time. Meanwhile a wicked-looking goat appeared on the scene. At first it nibbled at the bark of a frozen log, then it bleated in a nasty way and began to glare at Chuck and Geck.

Chuck and Geck quickly hid behind the bags. You could never tell what the goats in these parts were after.

But here came Mother. She looked very downcast and told them that in all probability Father had not received their telegram and therefore had not sent a sleigh to the station for them.

They called a sleigh driver. He flicked the goat on the back with his long whip, then picked up the bags and carried them off to the refreshment room inside the station.

The refreshment room was very small. Behind the counter there puffed a fat samovar as big as Chuck. It shook and whistled, and its thick steam rose like a cloud to the boarded ceiling where a few little sparrows had found shelter from the cold and were chirping away.

While Chuck and Geck were having their tea, Mother bargained with

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* Voroshilov, Kliment (1881-1969) — Soviet statesman and Party figure, Marshal of the USSR. From 1934 to 1940, People's Commissar for Defence.— *Ed.*

the sleigh driver. To take them through the taiga to their destination he asked a huge sum — a hundred rubles. But come to think of it, it was really a long way. At last they agreed upon the fare and the driver went home for bread, hay and sheepskins.

"Father doesn't even know we've arrived," said Mother. "Won't he be surprised and happy to see us!"

"Yes, he will," Chuck said very solemnly as he drank his tea. "I'll be surprised and happy too."

"Me too," said Geck. "You know what — let's drive up as quiet as mice, and if Dad is out somewhere, we can hide the bags and crawl under the bed. He'll come in and sit down, and all the time we'll be holding our breath. Then all of a sudden we'll let out a whoop!"

"I'm not going to crawl under any bed," said Mother. "Or let out any whoops. You can crawl under and whoop yourselves. Chuck, why are you putting sugar in your pockets? They're full enough as it is — you've a regular rubbish bin there."

"That's to feed the horses," Chuck calmly explained. "Geck, you'd better take a bun along too. You never have anything yourself and you're always begging of me."

Soon the driver came back. The bags were loaded into the roomy sleigh. Hay was strewn in the bottom and the boys were tucked in and covered over with blankets and sheepskins.

Goodbye, big cities, factories, stations, villages and hamlets! Ahead lies the land of woods and hills and dense black forests.

*

They rode along merrily till dusk, open-mouthed with wonder at the beauty of the dense taiga. But then Chuck, who could not see the road very well because of the driver's back, grew restless and asked Mother for a bun or a patty.

Naturally, she gave him neither. He sulked, and for want of anything better to do began to push Geck and squeeze him against the edge of the sleigh.

At first Geck resisted patiently. But then he could stand it no longer and spat at Chuck. Chuck flared up and threw himself at Geck. But since their arms were pinned down by the heavy sheepskins, all they could do

was butt each other with their hood-wrapped heads.

Mother looked at them and laughed. The driver whipped up the horses and off they flew.

Two fluffy white hares skipped out on the road and began to dance.

"Hey, there! O-ho-ho!" yelled the driver. "Look out or we'll run you over!"

The mischievous hares scampered off into the woods.

A blustering wind blew in their faces. Chuck and Geck could not help hugging each other while the sleigh sped downhill through the taiga — sped towards the moon as it slowly rose over the approaching Blue Mountains.

Then suddenly the horses halted of their own accord by a little snowbound hut.

"Here's where we stop for the night," said the driver, jumping off the sleigh. "This is our station."

The hut was small but sturdy. And no one lived there at all.

A kettle was soon set to boil and the driver brought in a hamper of food.

You could have hammered nails with the sausage — it was so stiff and frozen. They soaked it in hot water and put slices of bread on the hot stove.

Rummaging behind the stove, Chuck found a bent spring. The driver told him that it was part of a trap to catch animals with. The spring was a rusty one and obviously was not being used. Chuck could see that right away.

After supper they went to bed. A wide wooden bedside stood by the wall. A heap of dry leaves made up its mattress. Geck would not sleep at the side nearest the wall or in the middle of the bed. He liked to sleep on the outside. And though he still remembered the little song sung to him as a baby, the words of which ran, "Lullaby, baby, my heart's pride, don't lie in bed on the outside", he always slept on the outside.

If he found himself in the middle, he was sure to pull the blanket off his bedfellows, dig his elbows into them and press his knees into Chuck's stomach.

They went to bed without undressing and covered themselves with the sheepskins. Chuck hugged the wall, Mother lay in the middle and Geck slept on the outside.

The driver blew out the candle and climbed into the bunk above the

stove. They all fell asleep at once. At night, however, Geck felt thirsty as usual and woke up.

Still dazed with sleep, he drew on his felt boots, pattered over to the table, drank some water out of the kettle and then sat down on a stool by the window.

The moon had drifted behind the clouds and the snowdrifts seemed bluish-black through the frozen window-panes.

"Looks as if Dad has almost reached the end of the earth!"

Surely, Geck thought, there could not be many places in the world farther away than this.

Suddenly he lifted his head. He thought he heard a knock outside the window. No, not a knock but more like the sound of snow crunching under somebody's heavy footsteps. Yes, that was it! Out there in the dark something heaved a sigh, moved and shifted its feet. Geck felt sure it was a bear.

"Wicked Bear! What do you want? We're taking such a long time to get to Father and you want to gobble us up so we never see him again? Oh no, you don't! Better go away before someone shoots you down with his trusty rifle or stabs you with his sharp sabre."

Geck muttered these words through his nose, while he pressed his face hard against the frosted pane of the narrow window. He was both frightened and curious.

But just then the moon rushed out from behind the fleeting clouds. The bluish-black snowdrifts now took on a soft milky sheen and Geck saw that the bear was not a bear after all, but their horse that had got untied and was stamping around the sleigh, nibbling at the hay on it.

Geck was disappointed. He crawled back under the sheepskin. And since he had been having unpleasant thoughts, he dreamt an unpleasant dream.

The strangest dream did Geckie dream:
He had a fright — an ogre mean
Stood spitting spit that burned and seared
And swung an iron fist and sneered.
Past raging fires, o'er trampled snow! —
The soldiers goose-stepped row on row.
They dragged along the vilest dross:
A fascist flag with crooked cross.

"Hey, stop!" Geck shouted at them. "You're going the wrong way! You can't come this way!"

But nobody stopped or listened to Geck.

Enraged, he snatched up a tin bugle, the one that was stored away in Chuck's shoe box, and blew on it so hard that the preoccupied commander of the armoured train raised his head sharply. An imperative wave of the hand, and all those fierce, heavy guns of his barked out at the same time.

"Good!" Geck cried approvingly. "Give them some more! One's not enough for them!"

*

Mother was awakened by the twisting and turning of her two precious little boys.

She turned towards Chuck, and something stiff and sharp pricked her side. She felt round and pulled out the trap spring which the ever-thrifty Chuck had secretly taken to bed with him.

She threw it behind the bed. Then, in the moonlight, she glanced at Geck's face and saw that he was having bad dreams.

A dream, of course, is not a spring and you cannot throw it away. But it can be blown away. So she turned him on his side and, rocking him gently, began to blow on his flushed little forehead.

Soon Geck smacked his lips and smiled. That meant his bad dreams had been blown away. After that Mother got out of bed and went over to the window in her stockinged feet.

It had not yet dawned and the sky was still full of stars. Some of the stars twinkled at a great distance while others hung right over the taiga.

And — strange thing! Sitting where little Geck had been sitting she thought just as he had that there surely could not be many places in the world farther away than this spot that her adventuresome husband had come to.

*

The whole of the following day their way lay through forests and over hills. When they rode uphill, the driver got out and plodded alongside

in the snow. But on the steep downgrades their sleigh slid so rapidly that Chuck and Geck felt as if the sleigh, horses and all were shooting down from the skies.

At last, towards evening, when both travellers and horses were pretty tired out, the driver said:

"Well, here we are! Behind that point there's a turn. And in the opening beyond we'll find the camp. Come on, there! Giddap!"

Chuck and Geck jumped up, squealing with delight, but at that moment the sleigh jerked and they both tumbled back into the hay.

Mother smiled and threw back the wollen scarf that had been wrapped round her fluffy hat.

Here was the turn. The sleigh veered smartly and came to a stop near three little houses standing in a small opening in the forest that was sheltered from the winds.

But how strange! Not a single dog barked and there was not a soul in sight. No smoke came from the chimneys. All the pathways were snowed over and all round reigned the stillness of a graveyard in winter. The only living things in sight were a few black-and-white magpies hopping about stupidly from tree to tree.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Mother asked the driver in a frightened voice.

"This is it all right," he said. "Those three houses over there are Geological Prospecting Station No. 3. There's a sign on the post ... see? Could it be Station No. 4 you're wanting? If so, that's about two hundred kilometres in the other direction."

"No, no," Mother said, as she stared at the sign. "This is the one we're looking for. But the doors are all locked and there's snow on the porches. Where can everybody be?"

"That I can't say," the driver said, perplexed. "Last week we brought provisions: some flour, onions and potatoes. All the men were here. Eight of them, not counting the chief and the watchman. A fine kettle of fish! The wolves couldn't have gobbled 'em all up. You wait here while I look in the watchman's house."

Throwing off his sheepskin, the driver ploughed through the snow to the farthest hut.

He soon came back.

"The house is empty but the stove is still warm. The watchman must

be around — he's probably out hunting. He'll be back before night and tell you everything you want to know."

"But what can he tell me?" Mother cried. "I can see myself that the men have been gone for some time."

"Don't know what he'll tell you," replied the driver. "But tell you something he will, because he's the watchman."

They drove up to the porch of the watchman's hut with great difficulty. A narrow path led from it to the forest.

They walked into the entranceway, past shovels, brooms, axes and sticks, past a frozen bearskin hanging from an iron hook, and entered the room. The driver brought up the rear with the bags.

It was warm in the hut.

The driver went out to feed the horses. In silence Mother helped the frightened boys off with their coats.

"That's an awful long way to come and find Father gone!"

Mother sank down on a bench and thought hard. What had happened? Why was the camp deserted? What were they to do now? Go back? But she had only just enough money to pay the driver as it was. They would have to wait for the watchman. But the driver would leave in three hours' time — and what if the watchman did not return before then? The nearest railway station and telegraph office were almost a hundred kilometres away.

The driver came in, glanced round the room, sniffed, and then went up to the stove and looked into the oven.

"The watchman will be back before nightfall," he assured them. "See, here's a pot of cabbage soup. If he were off on a long trip he'd have put the soup out in the cold. But do as you think best," he continued. "Seeing as things are, I can take you back to the station free of charge; I'm not hard-hearted."

"No," Mother said. "It's no use our going back to the station."

They put the kettle on again, warmed the sausage, and ate and drank. While Mother brought out their things, Chuck and Geck climbed up to the warm bunk above the stove. There it smelt of birch twigs and warm sheepskins and pine shavings. Since Mother was upset and silent, Chuck and Geck were silent too. But it was hard to be quiet for any length of time, so, for want of anything better to do, Chuck and Geck soon fell fast asleep.

They did not hear the driver leave, or Mother climb up and lie down beside them. They awoke when it was already very dark in the hut. The three of them were roused at the same time by the sound of stamping on the porch. Something fell with a loud clatter in the entranceway — a spade, probably. The door swung open and the watchman walked in with a lantern in his hand and a big shaggy dog at his heels.

He slipped his rifle off his back, threw a dead hare on the bench and, lifting his lantern over the stove, said:

"Now who are you, people?"

"I'm the wife of Seryogin, the chief of the geological party," replied Mother, climbing down from the bunk, "and these are his children."

The watchman raised his lantern to the scared faces of Chuck and Geck.

"The dead spit of their Dad, all right. Especially this chubby fellow here." He pointed his finger at Chuck.

Chuck and Geck were hurt. Chuck, because the man said he was chubby, and Geck, because he thought he looked more like his father than Chuck.

"Now why have you come rushing out here like this?" the watchman said, glancing at Mother. "You were told not to come, you know."

"I don't know what you mean. Who told us not to come?"

"You were told not to come. I myself took Seryogin's telegram to the station, and it said clear as anything: 'Postpone arrival two weeks. Party urgently going into taiga.' And when Seryogin says, 'Postpone arrival', it means postpone arrival. Breaking orders, that's what you're doing."

"What telegram are you talking about?" Mother asked. "We didn't get any telegram." And as though seeking confirmation, she looked up dazedly at Chuck and Geck.

But she found them eyeing each other with alarm and backing quickly towards the wall.

"Children," she said, glancing at the boys with suspicion. "Did a telegram come while I was out of the house?"

Up on the bunk the dry twigs and shavings crackled, but there was no answer.

"Answer me, tormentors!" Mother cried. "Did you receive a telegram while I was out and forget to give it to me?"

Several more seconds passed. Then suddenly a lusty bawl poured forth from the bunk. Chuck's voice sounded the lower notes of the register while Geck's took the high notes and trills.

"You wicked children!" Mother exclaimed. "You'll be the death of me yet. Stop that noise now and tell me what happened."

At the mention of the word "death", Chuck and Geck howled still louder. Quite some time passed before they could be made to tell their sad tale, not without much shameless wrangling as to whose fault it was.

*

Well, what can one do with such children? Take a stick to them? Put them in prison? Shackle them with ball and chain and send them out to hard labour? No, Mother did not do any of these things. She only sighed and ordered her sons to climb down from the bunk, wipe their noses and wash themselves, and then asked the watchman what he thought she should do now.

The watchman said that the geological party had gone off to the Alkarash Gorge on an urgent assignment and would not be back for at least ten days.

"But how can we get along for ten days?" Mother asked. "We haven't any food with us!"

"You'll have to manage somehow," the watchman replied. "I'll leave you some bread and you can have that hare — skin it and cook it. Tomorrow I have to go into the taiga for a couple of days. To inspect my traps."

"I don't like that," Mother said. "How can we stay here alone? We don't know anything about the place, and all round us there's nothing but the forest and beasts..."

"I'll leave you a gun," said the watchman. "There's wood in the shed, and a spring beyond the hillock. This is a sack of cereals. The salt's in this can. I haven't got time, you understand, to bother with you..."

"Ooh, what a nasty man," Geck whispered to Chuck. "Come on, Chuck, let's give him a piece of our mind."

"No," said Chuck. "If we do that, he'll throw us out of the house. Better wait until Dad comes. We'll tell on him then."

"Until Dad comes? But he won't be here for ever so long."

Geck went up to Mother, climbed on her lap, and, knitting his eyebrows, scowled at the rude watchman.

The watchman took off his fur jacket and came up to the table on

which the lantern stood.

Only then did Geck notice that a large piece of fur had been ripped out of the back of the jacket, all the way down from shoulder to beltline.

"The cabbage soup's in the stove," he said to Mother. "The spoons and bowls are over there on the shelf. Sit down and eat. Meanwhile I'll tend to my coat."

"You're the host here," said Mother. "*You* set out the food and give me your coat. I'm sure, I'll do a better patching job on it than you."

The watchman glanced up at her and encountered Geck's stern glare.

"Oho! You're a stubborn lot, I can see that," he muttered. Giving her his coat, he got up and went to the shelf for the plates.

"Where did you get all torn up like that?" Chuck asked, pointing to the rip.

"Had a little scrap with a bear. He gave me a scratch," the watchman replied unwillingly, as he plunked a heavy pot of cabbage soup on the table.

"Did you hear that, Geck?" cried Chuck, when the watchman left the room. "He had a fight with a bear; I suppose that's why he's so angry today."

Geck had heard, but he did not like to see his mother mistreated by anyone, even if it were a man who could scrap single-handed with a bear.

*

At daybreak the next morning, the watchman collected his sack, gun and dog, put on his skis and plunged into the taiga. Now they had to shift for themselves.

All three went out for water. On the other side of the hillock a little spring gushed out into the snow from an overhanging rock. Steam, as dense as a kettle's, rose from the water, but when Chuck put his finger into the spring he found that the water was ice-cold.

Next they brought in some wood. Mother did not know how to start the huge stove and the wood would not catch fire for a long time. When it finally did begin to burn, the flames were so hot that the thick layer of ice on the window of the opposite wall melted off almost at once. Now you could see the fringe of the forest through it, and the trees with the magpies hopping from branch to branch, and the rocky peaks of the Blue Mountains.

Mother knew how to pluck and draw a chicken, but she had never

skinned a hare before. In the time she spent on it, a cow or a bull could easily have been skinned.

Geck didn't like the skinning a bit, but Chuck willingly helped Mother and was rewarded with the hare's tail; it was so light and fluffy that it floated through the air like a parachute when he threw it down from the stove bunk.

After dinner the three of them went out for a walk.

Chuck urged Mother to take along the gun or at least a few cartridges. But she would not take the gun.

Instead, she hung it on the highest hook, then stood on a stool and put the cartridges away on the topmost shelf, warning Chuck that if he should dare to take a single cartridge he'd never know a day of peace again. Chuck reddened and scampered away. A cartridge already lay in his pocket.

It was an unusual walk indeed. They went in single file along the narrow path leading to the spring. The sky above shone a cold blue and the jagged cliffs of the Blue Mountains loomed like dream castles and towers. The inquisitive magpies broke the frosty silence with their cries. Nimble-footed grey squirrels leapt and dived through the thick branches of the cedars. Under the trees the footprints of strange beasts and birds had woven a weird pattern in the soft white carpet of snow.

Suddenly a crash and a groan sounded in the taiga. Most likely a mass of frozen snow had gone crashing down through the branches from the top of a tree.

Before, in Moscow, Geck had thought that the whole world consisted of Moscow, its streets, houses, trams and buses.

Now it seemed to him that the whole world was one huge dark forest.

Geck was like that: if the sun shone over him, he was sure the sky all round the earth was clear of clouds or rain.

And when he felt happy he thought that everybody else in the world must be happy too.

*

Two days passed. Came a third, and still no watchman appeared from the forest. There was a feeling of alarm in the little snow-bound hut.

It was most terrifying of all in the evenings and at night. They locked

and bolted the doors of both the room and porch, and blacked out the windows with mats so that the light would not attract the beasts to the house, although they should have done just the opposite, because a beast is not a man, and it is afraid of light. The wind howled in the chimney, of course, and when the blizzard outside whipped sharp little icicles against the walls and the window-panes, it seemed to those inside that someone was scraping and scratching there.

They climbed into the bunk above the stove and Mother told them all sorts of stories and fairy tales. At last she dozed off.

"Chuck," said Geck. "How is it there are magicians only in fairy tales? Wouldn't it be fun if there were real magicians?"

"And witches and devils too?"

Geck shook his head in annoyance. "No, who cares for devils anyway? They're no good for anything. But if we could call a magician, we could tell him to fly over to Father and let him know we've come long ago."

"But what would he fly on?"

"Fly on?.. Why, he'd just flap his arms or do something else. He'd find a way, don't you worry."

"It's too cold now for him to flap his arms," said Chuck. "Look at me: I had my gloves on, and mittens too, and still I got my fingers frozen bringing in the wood."

"No, but honestly, Chuck, don't you think it would be fun?"

Chuck wavered. "How should I know? Remember the lame man who lived in the basement in our yard, where Mishka Kryukov lives? Well, he used to sell doughnuts, and all sorts of old women used to come to him and get their fortunes told — you know, about who'd have luck and who wouldn't and all that."

"Well, did their fortunes really come true?"

"I don't know. I only know the militia came and took him away and a lot of things were found in his place."

"Well, that shows he wasn't a magician at all. He was just a crook. What do you think?"

"Of course he was a crook," Chuck agreed. "But what I mean is — all magicians are crooks. What does a fellow like him want to work for, when all he has to do is wriggle through a hole to get what he wants? But you'd better go to sleep, Geck, because I'm not going to talk to you any more."

"Why not?"

"Because you're talking a lot of nonsense and then you'll have a nightmare and dig your knees and elbows into me. You think it was nice having you punch me in the stomach last night? Here, let me try it on you."

*

On the morning of the fourth day Mother had to chop firewood herself. They had eaten the hare long ago and the magpies had already picked the bones clean. All they had for dinner that day was porridge with lard and onions. Their stock of bread was giving out, but Mother found some flour and baked a few cookies for them.

After that dinner Geck felt very low, and Mother wondered if he hadn't developed a temperature.

She ordered him to stay inside. Then she dressed Chuck, took pails and a little sleigh, and the two went out for water and to gather brushwood to start the stove with in the morning.

Geck was left alone. He waited and waited. Then he grew restless, and...

*

Chuck and Mother were gone for some time. On their way back the little sleigh with the pails of water overturned, and they had to go back to the spring. Then, halfway home, they discovered that Chuck had left one of his mittens at the edge of the forest. Again they turned back. In the meantime dusk fell.

When they got home at last, Geck was nowhere to be found. First they thought he was hiding under a pile of sheepskins on the stove bunk; but no, he was not there.

Chuck smiled slyly and whispered into Mother's ear that Geck, of course, was under the stove.

Mother grew very angry at that and ordered Geck to come out at once. But Geck was silent.

Then Chuck took the long stove fork and began to poke about with it under the stove. No, Geck was not there.

Mother became really worried then. She glanced at the nail near the door. Geck's coat and hat were missing.

She went out and looked round the house. Then she came back and lit

the lantern. She peered into the dark storage room and into the woodshed.

She called Geck, she scolded and wheedled, but no response came. And meanwhile the gloom was swiftly swallowing up the snowdrifts.

Mother darted into the house again, tore the gun off its nail, seized the cartridges and lantern, and, telling Chuck not to dare leave the house, ran outside.

Plenty of footprints had been stamped into the snow during the past four days.

She did not know where to begin her search, but decided to go out to the road since she did not think Geck would have dared to go into the forest alone.

There was not a soul on the road.

She loaded the gun and fired it. Then she strained her ears. She fired a second time and then a third.

Suddenly from somewhere quite near came an answering report. Somebody was hurrying to the rescue. She wanted to rush forward but her felt boots sank in the snow. The lantern fell out of her hand, its glass broke and the light went out.

Suddenly a piercing scream came from the porch of the watchman's hut.

That was Chuck. When he heard the shots he thought that the wolves which had devoured Geck were now attacking Mother.

Mother threw the lantern aside, and ran panting to the house. She pushed the coatless Chuck inside, flung the gun into a corner, dipped a ladleful of icy water and took a few hasty gulps.

There was a clatter and a banging on the steps. Then the door flew open. Into the house, in a cloud of vapour, raced the dog followed by the watchman.

"What's the matter? What's all the firing about?" he asked, without greeting them or taking off his things.

"I've lost my boy." Tears streamed down Mother's face. She could say no more.

"Just a moment, now. Stop crying," the watchman snapped. "When did you lose him? Long ago? Or just now? Back, Fearless!" he ordered the dog. "Speak up, now, or I'll go away again!"

"An hour ago," Mother replied. "We were out fetching water and when we came back he was gone. He put on his coat and hat and walked off."

"He couldn't have gone very far in an hour, and if he's wearing his felt

boots and coat he can't be frozen. Come here, Fearless. Have a sniff at this."

The watchman pulled Geck's hood off the hook. Then he shoved the hood and Geck's galoshes under the dog's nose.

The dog sniffed at the things carefully and lifted his clever eyes to his master's face.

"This way!" cried the watchman, throwing the door open. "Go, Fearless, find him!"

But the dog wagged his tail and remained where he was.

"Go," said the watchman sternly. "Find, Fearless, find!"

The dog nosed the air restlessly and pawed the floor, but did not budge.

"What's all this capering about?" the watchman demanded crossly. Once more he shoved the hood and galoshes under the dog's nose, and then took hold of his collar.

But Fearless would not follow the watchman. He turned round and round and finally went off in the opposite direction.

He stopped near a big wooden trunk and scratched its lid with his shaggy paw. Then, turning to his master, he gave three loud and lazy barks.

The watchman handed his gun to the astounded mother, went over to the trunk and threw back its lid.

There, on a heap of sheepskins and sacks, lay Geck fast asleep. He was covered with his coat, and his head rested on his hat.

When he was lifted out and roused, his sleepy eyes blinked. He could not understand why such a fuss and pother was being made about him. Mother kept kissing him and crying. Chuck tugged at his arms and legs, jumping up and down.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" he shouted.

Shaggy Fearless, upon whose nose Chuck planted a kiss, turned away in embarrassment. He could not understand what the commotion was about either. He wagged his tail gently, and eyed with longing a chunk of bread lying on the table.

It turned out that Geck had become terribly lonely when Mother and Chuck went out for water, and he decided to play a practical joke on them. He took down his hat and coat and climbed into the trunk. His idea was to wait till they got back and began searching for him, and then give them

the scare of their lives by bellowing inside the trunk.

But since they had taken such a long time to come, he just lay there patiently, and before he knew it he dozed off.

Suddenly the watchman stood up and clapped a heavy key and a creased blue envelope on the table.

"Here, this is for you," he said. "This is the key to the room of our chief Seryogin and to the pantry, and a letter from him. He'll be here with his men in four days, just in time for New Year's Eve."

So that was where this surly, gruff-looking old man had been! He said he had to look after his traps, and instead he had skied all the way to the distant Alkarash Gorge.

Leaving the letter unopened, Mother got up and placed her hand in gratitude on the old man's shoulder.

But he merely began to grumble at Geck for overturning the box of wads in the trunk, and at Mother for breaking the lantern. He grumbled long and persistently but nobody was scared of this glum old man any more.

Mother did not let Geck out of her sight the whole evening, and at the slightest noise snatched at his hand as if she were afraid he would suddenly disappear. She was so nice to him that Chuck finally took offence and was sorry he hadn't thought of climbing into the trunk too.

*

And now the real fun began. The next morning the watchman unlocked Father's room, heated the stove to a blaze, and brought over their things. The room was large and filled with light, but everything in it was in great disorder.

Mother began housecleaning at once. All day long she moved things from place to place, scrubbed, washed and dusted.

When, in the evening, the watchman brought in some firewood, he stopped at the threshold in amazement. The room was so clean he dared not take another step.

But Fearless came right in.

He bounded across the freshly-scrubbed floor towards Geck and nudged him with his cold nose. "Hello, silly," he seemed to be saying, "it was I who found you and you ought to give me something to eat for that."

Mother threw Fearless a piece of sausage.

Whereupon the watchman started to grumble and declared that if dogs were to be fed on sausage in the taiga, the magpies would be set a-laughing.

And so Mother sliced off a half-length of sausage for him too. He said "Thank you", and went out, muttering to himself and shaking his grey head at the queer ways of city folks.

The next day they decided to put up a New-Year tree.

What didn't they use in making the decorations!

They cut all the coloured pictures out of the old magazines they found. Rags and cotton went into the manufacture of dolls and animals. From Father's tobacco box they took all the tissue paper and made lovely flowers.

Surly and gloomy though he was, after bringing in the firewood the watchman would stand in the doorway for a long time marvelling at their ingenuity. At last he could contain himself no longer. He brought them some tin foil, the kind that was used to wrap tea in, and a big chunk of wax left over from his cobbling work.

What fun! The decorations factory was immediately transformed into a candle factory. The candles were crude little things, but they burned as brightly as the best to be had in the city shops.

Now all that was lacking was the tree. Mother asked the watchman for his axe. He made no reply but stood up, put on his skis and went out to the forest.

In half an hour he was back.

Well, you can say what you like: you can say the decorations were not so attractive, that the rag bunnies looked more like cats, that the dolls were all alike — straight-nosed and goggle-eyed — and that the fir cones wrapped in tin foil did not sparkle as brightly as the coloured glass bulbs you see in the shops. But the fir tree — why, there wasn't one like it in the whole of Moscow! It was a real taiga beauty — tall and stately, with branches tipped with little green stars.

*

Four days slipped by unnoticed. And then at last New Year's Eve arrived. From early morning Chuck and Geck could not be made to come

indoors. Their noses were blue, but they tramped about in the frost, expecting Father and his men to appear at any moment. The watchman, who was busy heating the bath, told them they were freezing themselves to icicles for nothing because the party would not return before dinnertime.

And that was exactly what happened. No sooner had they sat down to table than the watchman knocked at the window. Throwing on their coats helter-skelter all three tumbled out on the porch.

"Keep a sharp look-out now," the watchman said. "In a few seconds you'll see them on the slope to the right of the big summit, then they'll disappear again in the taiga, and within thirty minutes they'll be home."

And so they were. First to come into sight from the mountain pass was a dog team harnessed to a few loaded sleighs, and after them came a group of swift skiers.

They looked very tiny out there with the huge mountains behind them, but their arms, legs and heads were clearly etched against the white snow.

Down the treeless slope they skimmed, and then they disappeared in the forest.

In exactly half an hour the sounds of barking and shouting and the creaking of sleighs could be heard close at hand.

Sensing the nearness of home, the hungry dogs shot out of the woods. And behind them, keeping pace, sped nine skiers.

When the men sighted Mother and Chuck and Geck on the porch they waved their poles in the air and gave a loud cheer.

Geck could not wait any longer after that and jumped down the steps. His felt boots sinking deep in the snow, he ran towards the tall bearded man who headed the group and who was shouting "Hurrah" louder than all the others.

*

The rest of the afternoon the men washed, shaved and cleaned up.

And in the evening they all gathered at a merry New Year's party.

The table was laid, the lamp blown out and the candles lighted. But since, except for Chuck and Geck, all the others were grown-ups, they did not know what to do after that.

It was a lucky thing one of the men had an accordion. He brought it out and played a lively waltz. Everybody jumped up and began to dance.

And they all danced very well indeed — especially when they danced with Mother.

But Father did not know how to dance. He was very big and good-natured, and he had only to pace the floor, let alone dance, to set all the crockery clattering in the cupboard.

He sat Chuck and Geck on his knees and they loudly applauded everybody.

Soon the dancing ended. Geck was asked to sing a song.

Geck did not have to be coaxed. He knew he could sing and he was proud of it.

The accordion-player accompanied him. I no longer remember what he sang. But I do remember that it was a fine song, because everybody was very quiet while he sang it. When he paused for breath you could hear the candles sputtering and the wind moaning outside.

And when he finished they all began to clap and shout. They seized Geck and wanted to toss him up in the air. But Mother quickly snatched him away from them, because she was afraid they might hit him against the wooden ceiling in the excitement.

"Now sit down, everybody," said Father, glancing at his watch. "The main part of the programme is about to begin." He switched on the radio.

They all sat down and waited in silence.

At first it was very quiet. Then they heard a noise, and the sound of motorcars honking their horns. Then there was a sort of scraping and hissing, and from far away came a melodious tinkle.

Big and little bells were ringing a refrain like this:

Teer-lil-lili-dong!
Teer-lil-lili-dong!

Chuck and Geck looked at each other. They knew what that was. It was the golden Kremlin chimes pealing out beneath the red star of the Spassky Tower in faraway Moscow.

And those chimes — on the eve of New Year — were heard by people everywhere — in town and hillside, in steppe and taiga, and on the blue seas.

And, of course, the preoccupied commander of the armoured train,

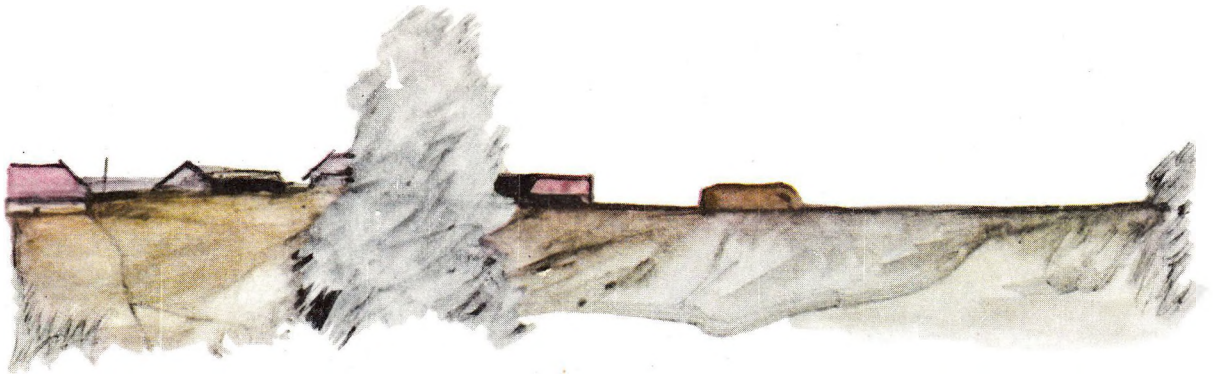
the one who waited so vigilantly for Voroshilov's orders — he also heard the chimes.

Everybody stood up. All wished one another a Happy New Year. And lots of happiness.

Each understood the meaning of happiness in his own way. But one and all knew and understood that they must live honourably, work hard, and love and cherish the vast, happy land known as the Soviet Union.

1939

THE BLUE CUP



I was thirty-two at the time. Marusya was twenty-nine, and Svetlana,* our daughter, six and a half.

I did not get my holiday until the end of the summer, so we rented a cottage in the country outside Moscow for the last warm month of the season.

Svetlana and I had planned to go fishing and bathing, and mushrooming and nut-gathering in the woods, but we had to start by sweeping out the yard, patching up the tumbledown fence, hanging up clothes-lines, and driving in nails and spikes.

We soon got tired of it, but Marusya kept thinking up new jobs for us and for herself.

It wasn't until the afternoon of the third day that all the jobs were done at last. And just as the three of us were about to go for a walk, Marusya's friend, an Arctic airman, came to see her.

They sat out in the garden, under the cherry trees, for a long time. Svetlana and I went to the wood-shed and through sheer vexation started to make a wooden whirligig.

When it grew dark Marusya called out to Svetlana to have her milk and go to bed, while she herself went to see her airman friend off to the railway station.

I felt rather miserable without Marusya, and so did Svetlana — she did not feel like going to sleep alone in an empty house.

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* English translation

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So we got some flour out from the pantry and made a sticky paste with boiling water.

Then we pasted the whirligig over with coloured paper, smoothed it out properly and climbed onto the roof through the dusty attic.

And there we were, sitting astride the roof. Looking down we could see a samovar smoking near the porch of the house next door. On the porch sat a lame old man with a balalaika and a crowd of children round him.

And then a bent old woman popped out of the dark entry. She shooed the children away, scolded the old man, and snatching up a rag, began to slap the top of the samovar chimney with it to make the water boil quicker.

We laughed, thinking: you wait, a wind will start up and our whirligig will begin to spin and hum. That's when the children will come flocking to our house from all the neighbouring yards. We'll have our own company, too, then.

And tomorrow we'll think up something new again.

Maybe we'll dig a deep cave for the frog that lives in our garden near the damp cellar.

Maybe we'll ask Marusya for some thick thread and fly a kite, fly it higher than the silo tower, higher than the yellow pine trees and even higher than that hawk, who all day long had been keeping a watch in the sky on the landlady's chickens and rabbits.

Or maybe tomorrow, first thing in the morning, we'll get into a boat — I at the oars and Marusya at the rudder, with Svetlana as passenger — and we'll sail down the river to where they say a big forest stands with two hollow birches growing on the banks under which the little girl next door had found three lovely mushrooms the other day. They were wormy, though, worse luck.

All of a sudden Svetlana tugged at my sleeve.

"Look, Daddy, isn't that Mummy coming? You and I will cop it now."

Our Marusya it was, coming down the path alongside the fence. We had not expected her back so soon.

"Bend down," I said to Svetlana. "Maybe she won't spot us."

But Marusya spotted us right away. She looked up and shouted:

"What are you doing on the roof, you two? It's getting damp. And it's time Svetlana was in bed. When the cat's away the mice will play — is that it?"

"We're not playing, Marusya," I said. "We're fixing the whirligig. We shan't be long, only three more nails to drive in."

"You'll finish it tomorrow. Now get down before you make me angry," Marusya commanded.

Svetlana and I looked at each other. Hard luck, we thought. So down we climbed. But we felt sore. And although Marusya had brought a big apple from the railway station for Svetlana and a packet of tobacco for me, we felt sore all the same.

And we went to sleep, feeling sore.

The next morning brought a fresh surprise. We had just woken up when Marusya comes in and says:

"Now, you miserable wretches, you'd better own up — who broke my blue cup in the pantry?"

I didn't break it. And Svetlana says she didn't either. We looked at each other and both of us thought how unfair it was of Marusya to blame us for something we didn't do.

But Marusya did not believe us.

"Cups," she says, "are not living things — they have no legs. They can't jump down on the floor. No one else went into the pantry yesterday except you two. You broke the cup but don't want to own up. Shame on you, comrades!"

After breakfast Marusya suddenly got up and left for town, and we sat down, looking glum.

So there goes our boating!

The sun peeped at us through the window. The sparrows hopped about on the sandy paths. The chickens scurried to and fro between the yard and the street through the wattled fence. But we felt anything but cheerful.

"Ah, well," I said to Svetlana. "You and I were chased off the roof yesterday. The empty paraffin can was taken away from us the other day. We're blamed for nothing over some blue cup or other. Call that a good life?"

"Anything but," says Svetlana. "A bad life I call it."

"I tell you what, Svetlana. Put on your pink frock. We'll take my kit-bag from behind the stove, put your apple, my tobacco, matches, a knife,

and a loaf of bread into it. And we'll leave this house and follow our noses." Svetlana digested this, then asked:

"Which way does your nose point?"

"It points, Svetlana, through the window at that yellow clearing out there, where our landlady grazes her cow. And beyond that clearing I know of a goose pond, and beyond that pond there is a watermill, and beyond the watermill there is a birch wood on a hill. As to what's beyond that hill I don't know myself."

"All right," Svetlana agreed. "Let's take a loaf of bread and my apple, and tobacco, but also take with you a big stick, because somewhere out there lives a fierce dog, named Polkan. The boys told me that he nearly bit one of them to death."

And that is what we did. We put what we needed into my kit-bag, we shut all five windows, locked the two doors and put the key away under the doorstep.

Goodbye, Marusya! We didn't break that cup of yours all the same.

As we came out of the gate we met the milkwoman.

"Do you need any milk today?"

"No, milkwoman. We don't need anything now."

"My milk's nice and fresh, it's from my own cow," the woman said in a hurt tone. "You'll be sorry when you come back."

And she went off with a clatter of her cold milk cans. How was she to know that we were going far away and maybe would not be coming back at all!

As a matter of fact no one knew it. A sunburnt boy rode past on a bicycle. A fat man in shorts, smoking a pipe, walked past — probably going mushrooming in the woods. A blonde girl with hair wet after her dip passed by. But we did not meet anybody we knew.

We came out through the back gardens onto the clearing, which was yellow with buttercups. We took off our sandals and walked barefoot over a warm path across the meadow straight towards the watermill.

We walked on and on, and suddenly we saw a man running towards us helter-skelter from the direction of the mill. He ducked his head as he ran, and lumps of earth flew at his back from behind the broom grove.

We thought it an odd sight. What could this mean? Svetlana had sharp eyes. She stopped and said:

"I know who that is. It's the boy Sanka Karyakin, who lives next door

to the house where a neighbour's pigs got into the garden after the tomatoes. Only yesterday he rode on the back of a neighbour's goat opposite our house. D'you remember?"

Sanka came running up to us, wiping his tears with the corner of a mat-bag.

"Why are you running helter-skelter, Sanka?" we asked him. "And why were those lumps of earth flying after you?"

Sanka turned his head away and said:

"Grandma sent me to the village shop to buy some salt. But Pioneer Pashka Bukamashkin is sitting at the mill and wants to give me a good hiding."

Svetlana stared at him. Well, well!

Whoever heard of such goings on in this Soviet land! Here was a boy running to the village shop for salt, touching nobody, and all of a sudden, for no reason at all, somebody wanted to give him a good hiding!

"Come along with us, Sanka," she says. "Don't be afraid. We're going the same way, and we'll take your part."

The three of us went through the dense broom grove.

"There he is, Pashka Bukamashkin," Sanka said, holding back.

We looked and saw a mill. Beside the mill stood a cart. Under the cart lay a shaggy little dog all covered with burdock prickles, looking with one eye at the sprightly sparrows, who were pecking the grain scattered over the sand. On a heap of sand, Pashka Bukamashkin sat shirtless, munching a fresh cucumber.

Pashka saw us, but did not take fright. He threw the uneaten bit of cucumber at the dog and said, without looking at anybody:

"At him, Sharik! Seize him! Here comes the famous White Guard Sanka. You wait, you miserable bourgeois! We'll get even with you."

Saying this, Pashka spat into the sand, a long shot. The shaggy little dog growled. The startled sparrows whirred up into a tree. Hearing such words, Svetlana and I went up closer to Pashka.

"Look here, Pashka," I said, "aren't you making a mistake? What sort of bourgeois and White Guard is he? He's just plain Sanka Karyakin, who lives next door to the house where a neighbour's pigs got into the garden after the tomatoes."

"Just the same, he's a White Guard," Pashka repeated doggedly. "If you don't believe me, I'll tell you all about him if you like."

Now Svetlana and I were very keen to hear all about Sanka. We sat down on a log, with Pashka opposite us, and the shaggy doggie on the grass at our feet. But Sanka didn't sit down. He retired behind the cart and sang out from there:

"You tell 'em everything then! Tell 'em how I got a whack on the back of the head. You think it doesn't hurt? Just try and give yourself one."

"There's a town somewhere in a foreign country," Pashka began calmly, "and from that town a workman, a Jew, ran away from the bourgeois. He ran away and came here, to us. And with him came a little girl, Bertha. He's working at this mill now, and Bertha plays with us. But just now she has run off to the village for milk. Well then, yesterday we were playing tipcat — I, Bertha, and this boy Sanka and another chap from the village. Bertha tipped the cat with a stick and accidentally hit this here Sanka on the back of his neck —"

"She caught me straight on the noddle," Sanka said angrily from behind the cart. "I saw stars, but she thought it funny, started laughing."

"Well, then, the cat hit this Sanka on the noddle," Pashka continued. "At first he wanted to sock Bertha, but afterwards he calmed down. He put a burdock leaf to his head and started playing with us again. Only this time he started to cheat something awful. He'd make extra steps and —"

"It's a lie!" Sanka cried, jumping out from behind the cart. "Your dog gave it a push with its muzzle, and the cat rolled forward."

"You were playing with us, not with the dog. Why didn't you put the cat back where it was? Well then, Bertha went and gave the cat such a hard whack that it went flying to the other end of the field and landed in the nettles. We thought it funny, but Sanka didn't see the joke. Naturally, he didn't like having to run after that cat into the nettles. He scrambled over the fence and shouted from behind it: '*Doora, zhidovka*!* Go back where you came from!' Bertha by this time knew that *doora* was the Russian for a fool, but she didn't know what *zhidovka* meant. She comes up to me and asks: 'What does *zhidovka* mean?' I was ashamed to tell her. I shouted: 'Shut up, Sanka!' But he shouted louder and louder on purpose. I went for him across the fence. He ran off and hid himself in the bushes. When I got back, what should I see but the

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* *Zhidovka* — an opprobrious name for "Jewess".— *Tr.*

stick lying in the grass and Bertha sitting in a corner on the logs. I called, 'Bertha!' No answer. I went up and saw there were tears in her eyes. So she'd guessed the meaning herself. So then I picked up a stone and put it in my pocket, thinking: 'You wait, Sanka, damn you! I don't know about other countries, but in this one we'll knock the bourgeois nonsense out of you all right!'"

We looked at Sanka and thought: "Well, old chap, a pretty rotten account of you, this is. It makes ugly hearing. And to think that we intended to take your part!"

I was just about to say this, when all of a sudden the mill came to life with a loud rumble, and the rested wheel started turning in the water. A floury cat, scared out of her wits, sprang out of the mill window. Only half-awake, she missed her aim and landed on the back of the dozing Sharik. Sharik jumped up with a yelp. The cat shot up the tree and the sparrows flew onto the roof. The horse jerked his head up and gave a tug at the cart. And out of the shed peeped a hairy man, grey with flour dust, and shook a long whip threateningly at Sanka, who darted away from the cart.

"Now then... None o' your monkey tricks. I'll box your ears for you if you're not careful!"

Svetlana started laughing. She felt a bit sorry for the unfortunate Sanka, whom everybody wanted to give a good hiding.

"Daddy," she said to me, "maybe he's not such a bourgeois after all? Maybe he's only just a fool? You *are* just a fool, aren't you, Sanka?" Svetlana said, peering kindly into his face.

Sanka's only reply was an angry snort and a toss of the head. He began to sniff, as if he wanted to say something. But what could he say, when he was guilty all round and there was nothing really he could say for himself?

At this point Pashka's doggie suddenly stopped yelping at the cat and turned towards the field, his ears pricked up. Somewhere behind the grove a shot rang out. Then another. Then one shot after another.

"A battle nearby!" Pashka cried.

"A battle nearby," I echoed. "Those are rifle shots. Hear that rat-tat-tat? That's a machine-gun."

"Who can it be?" Svetlana asked in a sinking voice. "Has war started already?"

The first on his feet was Pashka. After him scampered the dog. I caught Svetlana up in my arms and ran towards the grove too.

We had not gone half-way when we heard a shout behind us. We turned and saw Sanka.

With hands raised high above his head to catch our attention, he raced towards us straight across the ditches and hummocks.

"Look at him, jumping like a goat!" Pashka muttered. "What's the fool waving over his head?"

"It's not a fool. He's bringing my sandals!" Svetlana cried joyfully. "I left them on the logs and he has found them and is bringing them to me. You ought to make up with him, Pashka."

Pashka scowled and did not answer. We waited for Sanka and took Svetlana's yellow sandals from him. And now all four of us together with the dog went through the grove and came out on the edge of the wood.

Before us stretched a hilly field overgrown with bushes. A goat with tinkling tin bells stood tethered to a peg by a stream, nibbling at the grass. In the sky floated a solitary hawk. And that was all. No other living soul was to be seen in that field.

"Where's the war here?" Svetlana asked impatiently.

"I'll have a look," Pashka said getting up onto a tree stump.

He stood there for quite a time, squinting against the sun and covering his eyes with his hand. God knows what he saw there, only Svetlana got tired of waiting and went to look for the war herself, struggling through the tall grass.

"The grass is too high for me and I'm too low," Svetlana complained, rising on tiptoes. "I don't see anything at all."

"Look down, mind the wire there," a loud voice came from above.

Pashka flew off the stump in a flash. Sanka leapt aside clumsily. And Svetlana ran to me and clutched my hand.

We backed away, and straight above us, hidden in the dense branches of a solitary tree, we saw the figure of a Red Army man.

His rifle hung on a bough next to him. In one hand he held a telephone receiver, while he looked without stirring through shiny black binoculars at some point at the end of the empty field.

Before we could utter a word, a volley of gunfire rolled up from somewhere in the distance with a frightful crash like a clap of angry thunder. The earth shuddered underfoot. Far out across the field a whole

cloud of black dust and smoke rose into the air. The goat gave a wild jump and broke loose. And the hawk whirled in the sky, and working his wings swiftly, fled the scene.

"It's a bad lookout for the rotten bourgeois!" Pashka said loudly, glancing at Sanka. "See how our batteries work?"

"It is a bad lookout for the bourgeois," a hoarse voice repeated like an echo.

We looked, and there, next to a bush, stood a grey, bearded old man.

The old man had powerful shoulders. In his hands he held a heavy gnarled stick and at his heels stood a tall woolly-haired dog, baring its teeth at Pashka's Sharik, who had his tail between his legs.

The old man raised his broad-brimmed straw hat and bowed solemnly, first to Svetlana, then to the rest of us. Then he laid his stick down in the grass, got out a curved pipe, filled it with tobacco and lit up.

He took a long time doing it, now tamping the tobacco down with his finger, now twisting his finger in the bowl like a poker in a grate.

At last he got the pipe going, and puffed so hard at it that the soldier up in the tree started to sneeze and cough.

The battery fired a second salvo, and suddenly we saw the quiet empty field spring to life with a noise and stir. Red Army men with rifles atilt jumped out from everywhere, from behind the bushes, from behind knolls and mounds and ditches.

They ran, jumped, dropped, rose again. They came together, closed ranks, growing more and more in numbers as they ran, until at last, with loud cries, the whole vast mass bayonet-charged to the top of a sloping hill, where the cloud of dust and smoke was still reeking.

Afterwards everything grew still. From the top of the hill a signalman, looking no bigger than a toy, waved his flags. A bugle harshly sounded off. The observer in the tree climbed down, the branches snapping under his heavy boots. He patted Svetlana on the head, thrust three shiny acorns into her hand, and hurried away, rolling up the thin telephone wire on a reel.

The military drill was over.

"See that?" Pashka said to Sanka, nudging him with his elbow. "This isn't a tipcat in the neck for you. You bourgeois will have your noddles knocked off for you in no time."

"What strange talk do I hear?" said the bearded old man, stepping

forward. "Have I lived to the age of sixty without gaining any sense? I am quite at sea. Here, under the hillside is our collective farm named Dawn. All round are our fields — oats, buckwheat, millet, wheat. This mill on the river is ours too. And out there, in the wood, is our big bee-garden. And over all this I am the watchman. I've seen crooks and caught horse thieves in my time, but as for a single bourgeois turning up in my section — that has never yet happened under the Soviet government. Come here, Sanka, you terrible man. Let me have a look at you. Hold on, there. Stop dribbling and wipe your nose first. You're a fearsome enough sight as it is."

All this the mocking old man uttered in a leisurely way, the while he glanced curiously from under his bushy eyebrows at the pop-eyed and astonished Sanka.

"It isn't true!" Sanka wailed, deeply offended. "I'm not a bourgeois, I'm a hundred per cent Soviet. And Bertha isn't wild with me any more, she bit off over half of my apple yesterday. This Pashka here is setting all the boys onto me. He swears at me, but he tricked me out of my door-spring all right. If I'm a bourgeois, then my door-spring is bourgeois too. He went and made a rocking chair or something with it for his dog. I said to him: 'Come on, Pashka, let's make up,' but he says: 'I'll make up, but I'll give you a good hiding first.'"

"You must make up without any good hidings," Svetlana said earnestly. "You must hook your little fingers, spit on the ground and say: 'Quarrel, quarrel never, peace, peace ever.' Come on, hook fingers! And you, chief watchman, please shout at your terrible dog, tell him to leave our little Sharik alone and stop frightening him."

"Back, Polkan!" the watchman shouted. "Down, down, don't you dare touch friends!"

"Oh, so that's who he is! Polkan the fierce giant with the long tooth and hairy coat."

Svetlana, after slight hesitation, went up closer and wiggled a finger at Polkan.

"I'm a friend too. Don't you touch friends!"

Polkan looked at Svetlana. She had bright eyes, and her hands smelled of grass and flowers. He grinned and wagged his tail.

Sanka and Pashka became envious. They, too, went up closer and said: "And we are friends, too. Don't dare touch friends!"

Polkan sniffed at them suspiciously. These artful boys might smell of carrots from the collective-farm gardens, for all he knew. Just then, as if on purpose, a harum-scarum foal scampered down the path, raising a dust. Polkan sneezed and was left guessing. He didn't touch them, but neither did he wag his tail nor let himself be stroked.

"It's time to be moving on," I said. "The sun is high, it will soon be noon. Phew, it's hot!"

"Goodbye!" Svetlana took leave of everyone in a ringing voice. "We are going far away again."

"Goodbye!" the boys, now friendly, answered in one voice. "Come and see us again from faraway."

"Goodbye," the watchman said with smiling eyes. "I don't know where you are going and what you are seeking, but I would have you know that the worst faraway for me is the left-hand side of the river where our old village graveyard stands. And the best faraway is on the right, down by the meadows and across the ravines, where they are quarrying stones. From there go through the coppice, but keep clear of the bog. There, on the shores of the lake, stretches a great big pine forest. It has mushrooms in it, and flowers, and raspberries. There on the shore stands a house. My daughter Valentina lives in that house with her son Fyodor. If you happen to pass there give them my regards."

And then the queer old man raised his hat again, whistled to the dog, puffed at his pipe, leaving a broad strip of thick smoke behind him, and strode off towards the yellow pea field.

Svetlana and I looked at each other — who wanted that sad graveyard! We joined hands and turned right, towards the best of all the faraways.

We crossed the meadows and descended the ravines.

We saw men dragging sugar-white stones out of deep black holes. And not just one little stone that had been left lying about. A whole hill of them had been heaped up. And the wheels kept turning, and the barrows kept creaking. And more and more of them were piled up.

Seemingly lots of stones lay hidden underground.

Svetlana wanted to take a peep at that underground. She lay for a long time on her tummy, gazing into the black hole. And when I had pulled her back by the feet, she told me that at first she had seen nothing but darkness. And then she had made out under the ground a kind of black sea and someone in that sea was tumbling about making a great noise.

It must have been a shark fish with two tails, one in front, the other behind. And she also saw a Creepy-Crawly with three hundred and twenty-five legs. And with one golden eye. He was sitting there and roaring, was Creepy-Crawly.

I looked at Svetlana slyly, and asked her whether she had not seen there, while she was at it, a steamship with two funnels, a grey monkey up a tree and a white bear on an ice floe.

Svetlana considered this, then recollected having seen these things as well.

I wagged a finger at her — now, you're not fibbing, are you? But she only laughed and skipped away as fast as her legs could carry her.

We walked along for a long time, often stopping to rest and pick flowers. When we got tired of dragging the nosegays about with us we left them lying by the roadside.

I threw one nosegay to an old woman in a cart. She caught a fright at first, not knowing what it was, and shook a fist at us. But afterwards she smiled and dropped three big cucumbers off her cart.

We picked them up, wiped them and put them away in the kit-bag and blithely continued on our way.

We passed a little village, where lived those who plough the land, sow grain in the fields, plant potatoes, cabbages and beetroots or work in the gardens and orchards.

We also came across low green graves outside the village in which lie those who had done their sowing and tilling in this world.

We came across a tree blasted by lightning.

We ran into a herd of horses, each of them a beauty fit to join Budyonny's* cavalry.

We also saw a priest in a long black garment. We followed him with our eyes and wondered at the funny people that still remained in the world.

And then we became uneasy because the sky began to darken. Clouds gathered from all sides. They surrounded the sun, caught it and covered it up. But it kept doggedly breaking through one hole after another. At last it tore itself loose and shone over the vast world more brightly and hotly than ever.

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* Budyonny, Semyon (1883—1973) — hero of the Sivil War in Russia, Marshal of the Soviet Union.— *Ed.*

Our grey little house with the wooden roof was left far behind.

And Marusya must have come back a long time ago. She looked, and saw no one. She searched and found no one. She must be sitting there and waiting, the silly woman!

"Daddy," said Svetlana, now utterly tired out. "Let's sit down somewhere and have something to eat."

We began to look round, and by good luck we found a glade which was the most beautiful you ever saw.

The nut grove, with a swish, flung open its luxuriant branches before us. A young silvery fir tree tapered into the sky. And sweet-scented flowers — red, blue and purple — brighter than the flags on May Day, surrounded the fir by the thousand and stood without stirring.

Even the birds did not sing over that glade — so silent was it.

Only a silly grey crow flopped down onto a bough, looked round in surprise at having landed in such a place, let out an astonished "caw... caw..." and flew off at once to her nasty dust-holes.

"Sit down, Svetlana, and look after the kit-bag while I go and fill the flask with water. Don't be afraid, only one beast lives here — the long-eared hare."

"A thousand hares wouldn't frighten me," Svetlana said bravely. "Still, don't be long."

The water was farther off than I thought and I was beginning to worry about Svetlana on my way back.

But she wasn't frightened, she wasn't crying — she was singing.

I hid behind a bush and saw chubby red-haired Svetlana standing in front of the flowers, which rose to her shoulders and lustily singing a song which she had just made up.

Hey! Hey!
We didn't break the blue cup.
Oh, no, no!
The watchman of the field keeps his watch.
But we didn't go after the carrots.
I didn't and he didn't.
But Sanka did.
Hey! Hey!
The Red Army goes in the field.

(It has come from town.)
The Red Army is the reddest.
And the white army is the whitest.
Tru-ru-ru! Tra-ta-ta!
That's the drummers,
That's the airmen,
That's the drummers flying in aeroplanes.
And I'm a drummer, I stand here.

Silently and solemnly the tall flowers heard out this song and quietly nodded their heads to Svetlana.

"Come here, drummer!" I cried, parting the bushes. "We have fresh water, red apples, white bread and yellow honey-cakes. We grudge nothing for a good song."

Svetlana felt slightly put out. She shook her head reprovingly, screwed her eyes up just like Marusya and said: "Hiding yourself and listening. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, my dear comrade!"

Suddenly she grew silent and thoughtful.

In addition, while we were eating, a grey siskin suddenly hopped down the tree and started chirruping.

He was a plucky siskin. He sat right opposite us on a branch, hopping about and chirruping, and did not fly away.

"I know that siskin," Svetlana said. "I saw him when Mummy and I were rocking in the swing in the garden. She swung me ever so high. Tweet! Tweet! What made him come all this way?"

"Oh, no!" I said firmly. "This is quite a different siskin. You are mistaken, Svetlana. That siskin has some feathers missing from his tail. The landlady's one-eyed cat tore them out. That siskin is fatter and he chirps in quite a different voice."

"No, it's the same one!" Svetlana stuck to her guns. "I know. He has come all that way after us."

"Hey, hey!" I chanted in a mournful bass. "But we didn't break the blue cup. And we have decided to go far away for ever."

The grey siskin gave an angry chirp. Not one of the million flowers so much as stirred or nodded its head. Svetlana frowned and said severely:

"You haven't got the voice. People don't sing like that. Only bears do."

We got up in silence and left the grove. As luck would have it, a cool river gleamed pale-blue under the hillside.

I lifted Svetlana up. And when she saw the sandy bank and the green islands, she forgot everything in the world and joyfully clapped her hands, crying:

"Bathe! Bathe! Bathe!"

We took a short cut to the river straight through the wet meadows.

We soon came up against dense swampy thickets. We didn't like the idea of going back, and decided to get through somehow. But the farther we went the more the bog closed in upon us.

We wandered around the bog, twisting right and left, stepping over flimsy poles and hopping from hummock to hummock. We got wet and muddy, but we just couldn't find our way out.

Somewhere quite close beyond the bushes a herd of cows could be heard moving about. The cowherd cracked his whip and a dog started barking snappishly — he must have scented us. But we saw nothing except the rust-coloured water, the rotting bushes and sedge.

Svetlana became subdued and her freckled face looked worried. She kept turning round more and more often to peer into my face with a silent rebuke, as much as to say: "What's this, Daddy? You're so big and strong, and we're in such a fix!"

"Stand here and don't move!" I ordered, placing Svetlana on a patch of dry ground.

I turned into the thickets, but there, too, there was nothing but green ooze dotted with lush marsh flowers.

I went back and saw that Svetlana wasn't standing there at all. She was gingerly making her way towards me, holding on to the bushes.

"Stay where I put you!" I said sharply.

Svetlana stopped. Her eyes began to blink and her lips quivered.

"What are you shouting for?" she said in a low faltering voice. "I am barefoot, and there are frogs there — and I'm frightened."

I felt very sorry then for Svetlana, who was in trouble because of me.

"Here, take this stick!" I shouted. "Give those nasty frogs a good walloping! But stand still. We'll soon get out of here."

I turned off into the thickets again. What the devil! Who could compare

this filthy little bog with the boundless rushes of the broad Dnieper or the brooding rushland of Akhtirka, where we once caught and smashed a White Guard landing party of Wrangel's.*

From hummock to hummock, from bush to bush. One — waist-deep in water. Two — the crunch of a dry asp. A punky log flew into the mud in the wake of the asp. A rotting stump plunged in with a heavy splash. A foothold at last. Here was another puddle. And now dry land.

Parting the reeds, I found myself next to a startled goat, which had jumped up.

"Yoo-hoo! Svetlana!" I shouted. "Are you standing there?"

"Yoo-hoo!" a plaintive little voice came back from behind the thickets. "I'm standing!"

We got down to the river. We cleaned off all the mud and slime with which we were thickly covered. We rinsed our clothes, and while they lay drying in the hot sand, we bathed.

And all the fishes darted away in fear when we began to splash about in the water, laughing and raising glittering fountains.

And a black whiskered crayfish, whom I had dragged forth from his watery home, rolled his round eyes and wriggled and jumped about in terror. Probably this was the first time he was seeing such a glaringly bright sun, and such a glaringly ginger little girl. Anyway, he suddenly gave a twist and seized Svetlana's finger.

With a scream, Svetlana flung him right into the middle of a goose flock. The fat silly goslings scuttled away in all directions.

But up sidled a grey old gander. He had seen things more frightful than this in his time. He cocked his head to one side, took a look with one eye, and gave the crayfish a peck. And that was the end of the crayfish.

We bathed, and dried, and dressed, and continued on our way. And again we came across all kinds of things along the road — people, and horses, and carts, and lorries, and even a grey beast — a hedgehog, which we took along with us. Only he soon started to prick our hands, so we dropped him into a cool stream.

He snorted, did that hedgehog, and swam to the other side. He must

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* Wrangel, Pyotr (1878-1928) — one of the leaders of the counter-revolution during the Civil War in Russia.— *Ed.*

have been disgusted with us, thinking: "Those mischief-makers! Now try and find your burrow if you can!"

And then, at last, we came out to the lake.

Here ended the most outlying field of the Dawn Collective Farm, and on the other shore lay the lands of the Red Sunrise Farm.

Here, on the edge of the wood, we saw a log-built cottage and guessed at once that this was the home of the watchman's daughter Valentina and her son Fyodor.

We came up to the fence from the side where tall sunflowers, like sentinels, stood guard over the house.

On the doorstep, in the garden, stood Valentina herself. She was a tall, broad-shouldered woman, just like her father, the watchman. Her blue blouse was open at the throat. In one hand she held a broom, in the other a wet rag.

"Fyodor!" she shouted. "What have you done with the grey saucepan, you naughty boy?"

"There!" an important voice came from under the raspberry bushes, and tow-headed son Fyodor pointed to a puddle in which floated a saucepan with a cargo of wood chips and grass.

"And where have you hidden the sieve, you scamp?"

"There!" Fyodor answered just as importantly, pointing to the sieve weighed down with a stone, under which something could be seen stirring.

"You wait, you little bandit! I'll give you a taste of this wet rag when you come in," Valentina said, and catching sight of us, she pulled down her hitched up skirt.

"Good afternoon," I said. "Your father sends you his regards."

"Thank you," Valentina answered. "Come into the garden, have a rest."

We walked through the gate and lay down under a ripe apple tree.

Fat little Fyodor had only a shirt on. His wet trousers, dirtied with clay, lay in the grass.

"I'm eating raspberries," son Fyodor gravely informed us. "I have eaten up two bushes. I'm going to eat some more."

"I wish you good appetite," I said. "But mind you don't burst."

Fyodor stopped, poked a fist into his belly, glanced at me crossly, and picking up his trousers, waddled off towards the house.

We lay for a long time in silence. I thought that Svetlana had fallen asleep. I turned to her and saw that she wasn't sleeping at all. With bated breath, she lay staring at a silvery butterfly, which crept along the sleeve of her pink frock. And suddenly a shattering roar shook the air, and a gleaming aeroplane stormed over the tops of the quiet apple trees.

Svetlana started, the butterfly flew away, a yellow cock dropped off the fence, a startled jackdaw streaked across the sky, screaming, then all was quiet again.

"It's that airman again," Svetlana said with annoyance. "The one who came to our place yesterday."

"What makes you think so?" I asked, looking up. "Maybe it's quite a different one."

"No, it's the same one, I heard him tell Mummy yesterday that he was flying far away tomorrow and for good. I was eating a red tomato, and Mummy answered him: 'Well, goodbye. Happy journey.' Daddy," Svetlana added, climbing onto my stomach, "tell me something about Mummy. How was it, for instance, when I wasn't here yet."

"How was it? Everything was just the same. First day, then night, then day again and night again —"

"And so for a thousand days!" Svetlana interrupted impatiently. "You tell me what happened in those days. You know yourself, you're only pretending."

"All right, I'll tell you, only get off my tummy and sit on the grass, you're squeezing all the breath out of me. Well then, listen.

"Our Marusya was seventeen at the time. The Whites attacked their town. They seized Marusya's father and put him in prison. Her mother died a long time ago, so our Marusya was left all alone in the world."

"I'm beginning to feel sorry for her," Svetlana inserted, moving closer. "Go on."

"Marusya threw a shawl over her shoulders and ran out into the street. And in the street the White soldiers were conducting working men and women to prison. The bourgeois, of course, were glad the Whites had come, and in their houses the lights were burning and music was playing. But our Marusya had nowhere to go, no one to unburden her heart to."

"O dear, I do feel so sorry for her," Svetlana interrupted impatiently. "Hurry up and get to the Reds, Daddy."

"Marusya went outside the town then. The moon was shining.

A wind was blowing. And the wide steppe spread out before Marusya —"

"With wolves in it?"

"No. The wolves were scared off by the shooting. They all hid themselves in the forest. And Marusya said to herself: 'I'll run off to the town of Belgorod through the steppe. Comrade Voroshilov's Red Army is standing there. He's a very brave man, they say. If I ask him, he may help me.'

"Marusya didn't know, silly thing, that the Red Army never waits to be asked. It dashes to the rescue itself wherever the Whites attack. And the detachments of the Red Army were already moving through the steppe quite close to Marusya. And every rifle was loaded with five cartridges, every machine-gun with two-hundred and fifty.

"I was riding through the steppe at the time with a military patrol. All of a sudden a shadow appeared for a moment and instantly disappeared behind a knoll. 'Aha!' I said to myself. 'A White scout. You won't get away from me.'

"I put spurs to my horse. Bounded up that knoll. I looked, and would you believe it — there was no White scout at all. Instead, a slip of a girl stood there under the moon. I couldn't see her face, only her hair streaming in the wind.

"I sprang off my horse, the revolver in my hand, just in case. I went up and asked: 'Who are you and what are you doing in the steppe at midnight?'

"And the moon came out big as big can be. The girl spotted the Red Army star on my cap, and she fell on my neck and started to cry.

"That's how Marusya and I got acquainted.

"By daybreak we had driven the Whites out of the town. We opened the prisons and let the workers out.

"Well, it was daytime, and I was lying in the hospital. I'd been hit in the chest a bit. And my shoulder hurt me too — I had struck a stone when I fell off my horse.

"My squadron commander comes in to me and says: 'Well, goodbye, we're moving on after the Whites. Here's a present for you from your mates — some good tobacco and paper. Lie quietly and get better quickly.'

"And so the day passed. Welcome evening! There I lay with an aching

chest and a sore shoulder. Sick at heart too. You don't know how lonely it is, Svetlana, without your comrades!

"All of a sudden the door opens and Marusya comes in noiselessly and quickly on tiptoe. I was so glad that I all but cried out.

"And Marusya comes up, and sits down next to me, and puts her hand on my head, which was quite hot, and she says: 'I was looking for you all day after the battle. Does it hurt, dear?' And I said: 'Who cares if it does, Marusya. Why are you so pale?'

"And she says: 'Go to sleep. Sleep well, I'll sit by you all the days.'

"That's when Marusya and I met again and we have always lived together since then."

"Daddy," Svetlana said with emotion, "we haven't left home really and truly, have we? She loves us, you know. We'll walk around a bit and then go home again."

"How do you know she loves us? Maybe you she still loves, but not me."

"Oh, what a fibber!" Svetlana said, shaking her head. "Last night I woke up and saw Mummy put her book aside and turn towards you. She looked at you for ever so long."

"So what? She looks through the window too, she looks at everyone. She's got eyes, so she looks."

"Nothing of the sort!" Svetlana protested. "When she looks through the window her look is quite different, it's like this."

Svetlana raised her thin eyebrows, cocked her head, pressed her lips together and glanced incuriously at a passing hen.

"That's not the way people look when they love."

Svetlana's blue eyes became softly radiant, her lowered eyelashes quivered, and Marusya's dear wistful glance fell upon my face.

"You little witch!" I cried, snatching up Svetlana. "And how did you look at me yesterday when you upset the ink?"

"You turned me out of the room and turned-out people always look cross."

We didn't break the blue cup. Marusya herself may have broken something. But we had forgiven her. Who doesn't think ill of people sometimes for no good reason? Didn't Svetlana think ill of me once? And didn't I

think ill of Marusya too? And so I went to the mistress of the house, Valentina, to ask her the nearest way home.

"My husband will be going to the station soon in the cart," said Valentina. "He'll drive you down to the mill, and from there it's quite near."

Returning to the garden, I met Svetlana near the doorstep, looking embarrassed.

"Daddy," she communicated in a mysterious whisper, "that son Fyodor has crawled out of the raspberry bushes and is helping himself to the honey-cakes in your kit-bag."

We went over to the apple tree, but that cunning son Fyodor, when he saw us, beat a hasty retreat and hid himself among the burdocks growing round the fence.

"Fyodor!" I called. "Come here, don't be afraid."

The tops of the burdocks began to sway and it was clear that Fyodor was definitely retiring.

"Fyodor!" I repeated. "Come here. I want to give you all the cakes."

The burdocks stopped swaying and laboured sniffing noises came from out of the thickets.

And then a gruff voice:

"I'm standing without trousers, and there are nettles all over."

Then, like a giant striding over the forest, I stepped over the burdocks, hoisted out the ruffled Fyodor, and shook out before him all that was left in the bag.

He unhurriedly collected everything in the hem of his shirt and without so much as a "thank you" went off to the other end of the garden.

"How stuck up he is!" Svetlana remarked disapprovingly. "Goes about without trousers, like an aristocrat!"

A cart drawn by a team of two horses rolled up to the door. Valentina came out onto the door-step.

"Make ready. They're good horses, get you there in no time."

Son Fyodor reappeared, this time in trousers, walking quickly and dragging along by the scruff of its neck a pretty smoke-coloured kitten. The kitten must have been accustomed to such handling, because it did not wriggle or mew, but just slowly wagged its bushy tail.

"There!" Fyodor said, thrusting the kitten at Svetlana.

"For keeps?" Svetlana said overjoyed, and glanced at me hesitatingly.

"Take it, if you want it," Valentina said. "We've got plenty of them

around here. Fyodor! Why did you hide the honey-cakes in the cabbage beds? I saw it all through the window."

"I'll go and hide them in a better place," Fyodor reassured her and shambled off like a clumsy little bear cub.

"The spit image of his grandpa," Valentina said with a smile. "Strapping little fellow. You wouldn't believe he's only four."

We rode along a wide level road. Evening drew in. People coming from work passed by tired but cheerful.

A collective-farm lorry rumbled by.

An army bugle sounded in the field.

A signal bell clanged in the village.

A heavy panting locomotive chugged beyond the woods. Clangkety-clank! Turn quickly, wheels, hurry, coaches, the iron track is a long one, a far one!

Pressing the fluffy kitten close to her, happy Svetlana sang the following song to the accompaniment of the clattering cart:

Chiki-chiki!
Mice are abroad.
Abroad with tails,
Very wicked things.
They crawl all over the place.
They crawl on the shelf.
Crash-bang-bang!
Smash goes the cup.
And who's to blame?
No one's to blame.
The mice did it,
The mice out of their black holes.
Hello, moosikies!
We've come back.
And what do you think
We have come back with?
It mews,
It jumps,
And drinks milk from a saucer.
So back you go

To your black holes,
Or it will tear you
To pieces,
Into ten pieces,
Into twenty pieces,
Into a hundred million
Teeny-weeny pieces.

At the mill we jumped off the cart.

Behind the fence we could hear Pashka Bukamashkin, Sanka, Bertha and someone else playing tipcat.

"Don't you cheat!" Sanka was shouting at Bertha indignantly. "First you accuse me and now you're doing it yourself."

"Someone's cheating there again," Svetlana explained to me. "They'll be quarrelling again soon." And added with a sigh: "It's that kind of game!"

We approached the house excitedly. All we had to do was to turn the corner and walk uphill.

Suddenly we stopped and looked at each other perplexedly.

We hadn't come to the holey fence yet and the tall porch was still out of sight, but already the wooden roof of our grey little house came into view, and over it, humming away merrily, was our beautiful gleaming whirligig.

"Mummy's been on the roof herself!" Svetlana squealed, and pulled me along.

We came to the top of the hill.

The orange-coloured beams of the evening sun lighted up the porch. And there, in a red dress, bareheaded with sandals on her bare feet, stood our Marusya, smiling.

„Smile, smile!" Svetlana gave her leave as she ran up to her. "We have forgiven you all the same."

I went up, too, and looked into Marusya's face.

Marusya had hazel eyes, and there was a tender look in them. She looked as if she had been waiting for us a long time and now was very very glad that we had come at last.

"No," I said to myself firmly as I kicked away the broken pieces of the blue cup that lay on the ground. "This was the doing of those wicked mice.

We did not break it. Nor did Marusya break anything."

Then came evening. With its moon and its stars.

For a long time the three of us sat out in the garden under the ripe cherry trees, and Marusya told us where she had been, what she had been doing and what she had seen.

As for Svetlana's story, it would probably have dragged on till midnight had not Marusya suddenly bethought herself and sent her off to bed.

"Well?" artful little Svetlana said to me as she turned to go, taking with her the sleepy kitten. "Is ours a bad life now?"

We, too, got up to go in.

A golden moon shone over our garden.

A distant train rumbled northward.

A nocturnal airman droned past and disappeared into the clouds.

And life, comrades, was quite good!

1936

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Arkady Petrovich Gaidar wrote many books for children. They are all known and loved in his homeland. His real name was Golikov, but for his books he chose the pseudonym Gaidar, which means the horseman or scout sent on ahead of the patrol.

Gaidar always wanted to be one such scout for his country, but his life was cut short by war. He was killed while serving with the army as a front-line reporter on the 26 October 1941 during a battle with the Nazis. But his books live on to inspire the young with their message of duty, loyalty and friendship.

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